19 OCTOBER – 9 NOVEMBER 2026 • 9TH OCEAN LITERACY COURSE •
JOINT DECLARATION

The Ocean Has a Voice, Too

To understand the ocean, explore its challenges, and create solutions together…

The Ocean Is Not a Distant Landscape

We did not all arrive at this course by the same path. Some of us came because we had witnessed waste accumulating underwater; others sought more accurate words to teach their students; still others wanted to question how practices aboard ships affect the sea. Among us were divers, teachers, scientists, healthcare professionals, social scientists, communicators, public officials, and people just beginning to discover the marine world. What brought us together was the belief that understanding the ocean is as much a responsibility as loving it.

> *"I believe I can help correct the misconception that caring about the sea requires financial means and that only people living along the coast should take responsibility for it, through the content I produce."*

We take these words as an invitation: ocean literacy does not belong only to coastal residents, divers, or marine scientists. The path taken by rainwater, the plastic we use, the fish we eat, the news we produce, and the decisions we make all reach the sea. Its future is therefore everyone's concern. The ocean connects all life, yet it is also affected by all life.

Who Sits in the Empty Chair?

In the "Empty Chair" approach, adapted from conflict analysis and stakeholder assessment, we sought to bring into the discussion the needs of living beings, habitats, ecosystems, and future generations that are not represented at the decision-making table but are directly affected by its decisions. The empty chair does not imply that the ocean speaks like a person; it invites us to make visible the questions we must ask on its behalf, informed by scientific evidence, ecological needs, and our responsibilities.

During the 9th Ocean Literacy Course, we made decisions through a fictional scenario called "Shared Bay" (Ortak Koy). Whether considering an expanded pier, a proposed artificial reef, fisheries regulation, or coastal cleanup, we tried to consider not only those who could speak, but also those who would bear the consequences: seagrass meadows, juvenile fish, sea turtles, coastal ecosystems, small-scale fishers, and generations yet to be born. For us, the empty chair was a way to identify what decisions leave out and to see both problems and possible solutions more holistically.

> *"Through this course, I came to realise just how orphaned our seas have been."*

These words, spoken by a participant in our final session, capture a shared realisation. The seas are not without guardians, yet their ecological needs are often insufficiently represented in the very decision-making processes meant to protect them. Listening to the ocean therefore means more than

celebrating its beauty: it means taking habitats, scientific evidence, and the long-term consequences of decisions seriously.

> *"Sadly, the voices of all living beings are missing..."*

> *"How will an ecologically sustainable population be ensured?"*

Perhaps the most important lesson from these questions is that just because a project can be carried out does not mean it should be. We need the flexibility to acknowledge gaps in scientific knowledge and, where harm is possible, to keep alternatives, postponement, and even abandonment on the table. The ocean cannot be forced or taken lightly.

We Learned That Pollution Does Not End at the Shore

Collecting plastic waste matters, but the problem will persist unless we change the habits, waste-management systems, infrastructure, and production chains that carry it to the sea. As we discussed microplastics, nutrient loads, the movement of pollutants through food webs, and lost fishing gear, we saw that a coast that looks clean is not necessarily healthy.

> *"Pollution accumulating underwater is often overlooked when a coastline looks clean from the land."*

> *"Marine life and seagrass meadows would want waste never to reach the sea in the first place."*

We therefore advocate a language and practice of marine protection that go beyond cleanup: one that questions sources, measures impacts, prioritises prevention and protection, and makes the invisible visible. As one participant suggested, we value combining photography, storytelling, education, and scientific data so that people who have never seen underwater environments can grasp these problems in concrete terms.

As the Climate Changes, So Does the Sea

We explored the distinct temperature, salinity, current, and oxygen conditions of Türkiye's seas; their relationship with climate change; and the ecological and social consequences of invasive alien species. We considered how even the direction of a single light on a sea turtle nesting beach can make the difference between life and death. When discussing venomous and dangerous marine organisms, we emphasised accurate identification, reliable first-aid information, and responsible reporting rather than fear.

> *"The sea would want a beach with little light pollution, a stable climate, and respect for ecological balance."*

Protecting the sea does not mean denying change. It means being attentive enough to understand it, and open-minded and courageous enough to correct mistaken decisions. Before reaching firm conclusions about new species observations, coastal development, or habitat restoration, we need local and regional data, independent scientific assessment, and long-term monitoring.

On What Kind of Sea Will the Blue Economy Be Built?

We recognise the importance of coasts for livelihoods, transport, tourism, and production. But experience also tells us that calling an economic activity "blue" does not automatically make it sustainable. We cannot measure success in fisheries solely by catch volume, in tourism solely by visitor numbers, or in restoration solely by the number of structures installed. We must also consider habitat health, equitable access, livelihoods, and whether decisions can be reversed.

"How will you protect the sustainability of marine ecosystems and the right of future generations to life while pursuing economic interests?"

Two United Nations Decades, One Shared Responsibility

The United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) asks how the knowledge we need about the ocean can help us achieve the ocean we want. The United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) reminds us of our responsibility to prevent and halt degradation and restore ecosystems. For us, these two calls are complementary: sound restoration requires scientific knowledge, and knowledge that is not shared with society does not change decisions on its own.

For seagrass meadows, coastal wetlands, and other sensitive habitats, we emphasise that existing healthy areas must be protected first. Restoration is not a promise of compensation that grants advance permission for destruction. What matters is not only what will be done, but why, where, with whom, using which baseline data, and according to which ecological indicators its outcomes will be assessed.

On 9 November 2026, the very day our course concludes, COP31 climate talks begin in Antalya. As global climate decisions are discussed, this moment reminds us that the ocean's voice must also be heard. Warming seas, shifting species distributions, fragile coastal habitats, and communities whose livelihoods depend on the sea cannot be left out of the climate agenda. We bring together the Ocean Decade's call for knowledge and the Ecosystem Restoration Decade's responsibility to repair what has been damaged in a question raised from Antalya: To what extent do climate decisions account for marine life and the voices of those working to protect it?

The Commitments We Take Away from This Course

We want marine decisions to rest on scientific evidence; uncertainties to be acknowledged rather than concealed; local knowledge and independent expertise to listen to one another; and children, coastal communities, and the sea's silent inhabitants not to be forgotten. We stand for prevention at source in tackling pollution, ecosystem integrity in conservation, accurate information rather than fear in communication, and transparency and reasoned responses in governance.

"There is a serious disconnect between scientific findings and coastal communities along the Mediterranean."

We came together to help bridge that divide. One of the most important outcomes of the course was the opportunity for people with different experiences to ask one another questions. Sometimes a teacher's question changed how a researcher explained something. Sometimes a diver's observation exposed a gap in a management decision. Sometimes asking "What would the sea want if it were here?" changed the direction of the discussion.

Learning Also Means Changing Our Own Perspectives

Throughout the course, we questioned not only the problems facing the seas but also our own priorities in approaching them. Protecting ecological needs and understanding people's livelihoods and everyday needs do not have to be opposing goals. Conservation decisions must be scientifically grounded, but they also need to be understood, embraced by communities, and workable over the long term.

"I had the opportunity to reconsider how important it is to develop solutions that meet society's needs and benefit as many parties as possible, without compromising ecological priorities."

"The questions in the course did more than assess what I had learned; they helped me think from different perspectives and question my own approaches."

These reflections remind us that ocean literacy is not only about acquiring new knowledge, but also about revisiting the assumptions we bring to our professions. Perhaps learning to understand one another before trying to persuade one another is one of this course's most valuable shared achievements.

Not a Final Word, but a Sentence We Will Write Together

With this declaration, prepared at the end of our course, we commit to keeping the ocean within the scope of our decisions. We see ocean literacy not merely as knowledge gained, but as the ability to listen, ask questions, seek evidence, engage with different views, and change course when necessary.

For us, the ocean is not the backdrop to life; it is life itself. It is the breath of a planet we inhabit, understand, and breathe with together. We invite everyone to make its right to remain healthy a starting point for our relationship with the sea. To this end, we believe in bringing our paths and actions together for the ocean.

Editorial note: Participant quotations were drawn from module questionnaires, the overall course evaluation, and the closing session of 9 November 2026. Quotations are presented without names.

With Thanks to Our Instructors

Behind this declaration is more than a twelve-module learning programme: it reflects the generosity of our instructors in sharing their knowledge, experience, and questions. We sincerely thank all our educators for helping us understand marine life from different perspectives, question established assumptions, and think together.

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We also thank everyone who made this gathering possible and contributed to its preparation and coordination under the auspices of the International Ocean Institute (IOI) – Ocean Academy and the Turkish Marine Research Foundation (TÜDAV). We will continue to ask questions together about the future of the ocean.

Endorsed by

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