

We have the technical and operational measures that can substantially reduce underwater noise



HIGH AMBITION COALITION FOR A QUIET OCEAN

Carlos Bravo Villa welcomes a global alliance to reduce underwater noise

The ocean is predominantly an acoustic world where sound means survival. Most marine animals depend on sound for their vital functions such as mating, finding prey, avoiding predators and hazards, sensing their environment, orientation and communication. Human noise pollution is drowning out these vital sounds, but the solution is within our grasp.

Fortunately, we have a set of technical and operational measures that can substantially reduce underwater noise.

Commercial shipping is the primary source of underwater noise pollution in the ocean today, and its impacts to marine life are far-ranging and harmful

Commercial shipping is the primary source of underwater noise pollution in the ocean today, and its impacts to marine life are far-ranging and harmful. Growing scientific evidence has shown that underwater noise adversely affects the entire marine food web, encompassing aquatic plants, plankton, invertebrates, fishes and marine mammals, posing a substantial threat to marine ecosystems and biodiversity. Furthermore, underwater radiated noise from shipping

continues to intensify, mirroring the growth of activity in the sector.

Despite urgent calls for action from international bodies, including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the International Whaling Commission, the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals and the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area, as well as from marine scientists and civil society, progress to abate ocean noise has been limited.

A serious threat

Currently, within the framework of IMO, the shipping sector is keenly focused on reaching net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by or around 2050, which is

necessary to address the climate crisis. However, the sector must also consider how it can address the biodiversity crisis at the same time. The shipping industry must recognise that underwater noise pollution is a serious threat to marine biodiversity and ensure that international meetings examining the impacts of shipping include a priority focus on reducing ship noise. The vision should be a future of shipping that is both carbon-free and quiet. Fortunately, some shipping companies and some key international shipping associations are already fully aware of this need and are supporting progress in this direction.

There are a number of ways that countries can support the shipping industry to make the needed changes. In this context, on 10 June 2025, in Nice, during the third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3), at the initiative of the governments of Panama and Canada, a total of 37 countries joined forces to launch the High Ambition Coalition for a Quiet Ocean, the first global political coalition dedicated to reducing harmful noise pollution in the oceans. In addition to the two promoting countries, the 27 Member States of the European Union, Belize, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Monaco, Peru and Uruguay are currently part of the Coalition.

Alongside ministers from the governments promoting the initiative and other countries that have joined the Coalition, the launch event brought together the European Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism, the Secretary-General of IMO, representatives of the main maritime transport associations, international environmental NGOs and leaders of indigenous

communities, reflecting the growing international consensus on the need to address ocean noise in order to meet global biodiversity and climate goals.

The event was co-sponsored by the Government of Costa Rica, BIMCO, the IMarEST and the NGOs OceanCare, Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Investigation Agency, International Fund for Animal Welfare and Humane World for Animals.

The countries that form part of this coalition are committed to promoting science-based solutions that restore a quieter ocean, including the development of new policies to drive the design and operation of quieter ships within the IMO framework: supporting capacity building to assess and reduce ocean noise through the sharing of available tools and knowledge, including those currently being developed by IMO's GloNoise Partnership; establishing marine protected areas that take into account the protection and restoration of the ocean's natural soundscape; and investigating and

implementing effective solutions to reduce vessel impacts on sensitive ocean wildlife.

Double win

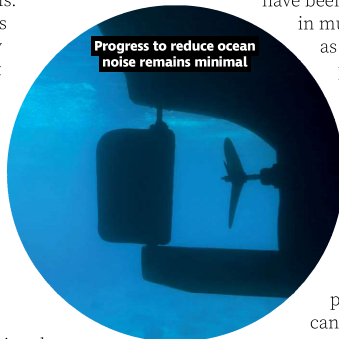
There are many measures to reduce harmful levels of noise in the ocean, and they can also bring wider environmental benefits. These measures can include vessel speed reduction, re-routing, or technical or operational improvements.

Slowing vessel speed is currently the most cost-effective way to reduce a ship's underwater noise. Vessel speed reduction programmes have been implemented in multiple countries as a means to both protect whales from collisions and to reduce underwater noise. Additionally, slow steaming can also lower GHG emissions and particulate pollution that can harm coastal communities.

In July 2023, IMO approved revised voluntary guidelines to reduce vessel noise, replacing the previous 2014 guidelines that had been largely ineffectual. It invited Member States and stakeholders to engage in a three-year experience-building phase to raise awareness of the solutions that can reduce vessel noise impacts on marine life. In September 2024, IMO agreed upon an Action Plan to further prevent and reduce shipping noise.

Like all UN bodies, the ambition levels of IMO are driven entirely by its Member States. It is a very important time for Member States to engage at IMO and to call for ambitious action, including new policies, to drive necessary reductions in shipping noise.

We all rely on our seas for transporting people and goods, obtaining food and carrying out other activities, but this should never be done at the expense of the environment. Protecting our oceans is a shared responsibility, and we must act together to safeguard their future, on which our own future also depends. ■



Vessel speed reduction programmes have been implemented in multiple countries as a means to both protect whales from collisions and to reduce underwater noise

Carlos Bravo Villa is ocean policy specialist at OceanCare. For more information on the High Ambition Coalition for a Quiet Ocean, visit foraquietocean.org