



ECOP
Early Career
Ocean Professionals



2021
2030 United Nations Decade
of Ocean Science
for Sustainable Development

ECOP CENTRAL AMERICA REPORT 2023-2024

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INTRODUCTION

ECOP PROGRAMME

On 5 December 2017, the United Nations proclaimed the Decade of Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development, which will run from 2021 to 2030 ("the Oceans Decade"). The Decade of Oceans, which began on 1 January 2021, will provide a common framework to ensure that ocean science can fully support actions to sustainably manage the oceans and contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), as the lead agency for the Oceans Decade, supported a group of committed ECOPs to establish an Informal Working Group (IWG) to examine how the Decade can support ECOPs to benefit from and contribute to the Oceans Decade. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the ECOP Programme, which was adopted as the Decade's Flagship Action on 7 June 2021.

Since its inception, the ECOP Programme has lived up to its goals of striving for intergenerational diversity and engagement, working together with the IOC and channelling opportunities to ECOPs. Capacity building training workshops, participation in high-level meetings and events, inclusive engagement platforms, as well as mentoring, networking and knowledge sharing dialogues are examples of these initiatives.

ECOP CENTRAL AMERICA

The Central American node was formed in September 2022 as a result of the programme's presence at the ICES PICES ECR conference in Newfoundland, Canada. The node is composed of six Central American countries: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Belize was not included in this node due to linguistic and cultural differences and its membership in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

The ECOP Central America unit is composed of a regional coordination, national coordination units and a communications team. As of December 2023 (Figure 1), the node had 87 members registered in the global ECOP register. Most ECOPs (32%) come from Costa Rica, followed by ECOPs from Honduras (28%), Guatemala (16%) and El Salvador (15%). Panama and Nicaragua have the lowest representation of ECOPs in the database with 8 % and 1 % respectively.

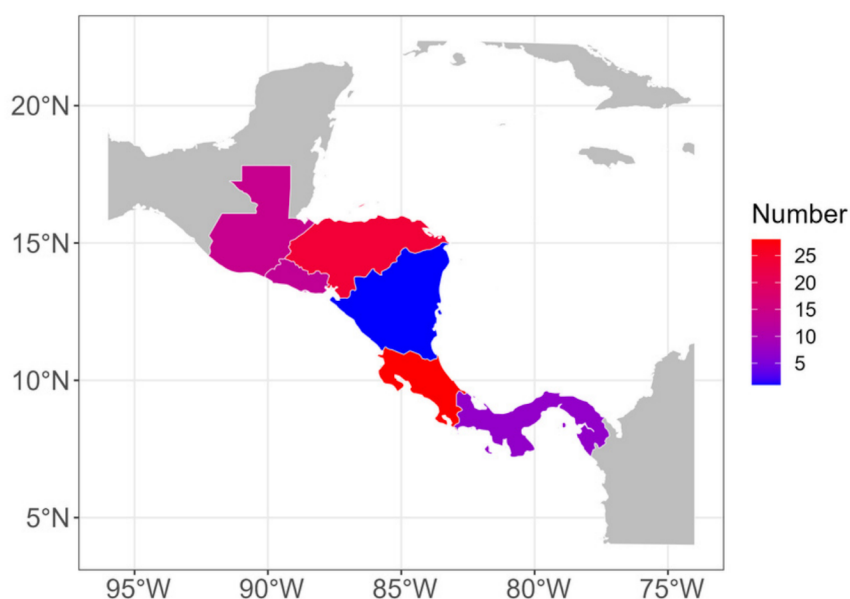


Figure 1: Nationality of Central American ECOPs present in the ECOP global database

ECOP Central America's vision is to enhance and make more visible the contribution of Central American ECOPs to the United Nations Ocean Decade at national, regional, and international levels through the creation of cross-sectoral networks and knowledge exchange. To this end, the node has the following main objectives:

- Raise awareness and disseminate the importance of the ocean and its issues at the regional level.
- Increase the representation of Central American ECOPs on the regional and international scene.

- Provide information and mentoring to Central American ECOPs in building ocean-related careers.

ACTIVITIES OF ECOP CENTRAL AMERICA IN 2023

As a first task, a coordination team was set up at regional and national level to work on the node's objectives. This working team, based on volunteering, carried out different activities throughout 2023:

- A monthly newsletter was generated to disseminate relevant news, opportunities (internships, jobs, scholarships), trainings, events (seminars, workshops, symposia) and opportunities. The newsletter has successfully helped finance the participation of five Central American ECOPs in international conferences and trainings through “*Inclusivity and Diversity Participation Funding*” from the Future Earth network.
- Throughout the year, five webinars were organised on the following topics of relevance to the region:
 1. Introducing ECOP Central America (Obstacles and objectives of ECOPs for the UN Ocean Decade).
 2. Knowledge and participation in the Decade of the Oceans: the role of Central America (in cooperation with the Sustainable Ocean Alliance).
 3. Panel discussion: Positioning of women ECOPs in marine field work
 4. Central American Reefs: Research and Conservation
 5. Underwater cultural heritage of Costa Rica

In each of the seminars, the work and experience of different recognised Central American ocean professionals from the region was presented. These seminars allowed for the exchange of knowledge and discussion of topics of high relevance to the Decade. The recordings of the seminars can be found on the youtube channel of the ECOP Programme and the recordings of the last three seminars can be found on the node's webpage. In addition, as a result of the discussion on the experiences of female ECOPs in the field, a network was created with the aim of creating a safe space for ECOPs to share experiences in the workplace and during fieldwork.

This network also aims to create a protocol that can be applied in the different organisations to which ECOPs belong to ensure the safety and integrity of ECOPs, especially women in high-risk areas.

- An Instagram account was created with the aim of having a more direct and quicker contact with the ECOPs. Through this medium we communicate the activities of the node and share more immediately opportunities of interest for the ECOPs. Currently, this account has more than 330 followers with a growing trend.

At the national level, the coordinators have been able to initiate cooperations with institutions and NGOs in their respective countries to implement activities at the national level. For example, most national coordinations have established cooperations with the Sustainable Ocean Alliance (SOA) programme in each respective country. The objective of this cooperation is mutual support for activities planned at the national level. For example, the coordinator of Guatemala together with SOA Guatemala visited the Peace Boat (MV Pacific World) and a screening of the documentary “Deep Rising”, where a forum with experts on the topic of underwater mining was present to discuss about the topic with the public.

The Honduran coordinators has initiated close cooperation with the National University of Honduras (UNAH, Spanish acronym), while the Salvadorian coordinators has started to cooperate with the Francisco Gavidia University. It is expected that, by early 2024, ECOP Central America will start a cooperation with the Smithsonian Research Institute, which can support activities in Panama. On the other hand, the Honduran coordination independently held a seminar online “ECOP Honduras: *forging ocean connections*”, where the country's coordination was presented and thus increase the participation of Honduran ECOPs in the node.

- Finally, a survey was conducted at the Latin American level with nodes in Mexico, the Caribbean and Brazil to identify barriers, needs and interests of ocean professionals in this region. The objective, methodology and results are presented below.

ECOP CENTRAL AMERICA SURVEY

OBJECTIVE

During the months of June to October, the ECOP Programme conducted a joint survey among the nodes of Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico and Brazil to understand the vision, challenges and diversity of ECOPs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

METHODS

The survey was conducted online through a Google form consisting of a total of 20 questions (closed, open-ended, mixed, multiple choice, and Linkert scale), which began by asking about the respondents' age, gender, nationality, country of origin and residence, education and professional area. The next questions were related to the United Nations Decade of Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development and the ECOP Programme, and a final part consisted of a series of questions that sought to find out about the challenges faced by ocean professionals in Central American countries. The objective of this survey was to identify the needs and challenges faced by early career ocean professionals in Latin American countries, as well as to learn about the diversity of professionals, initiatives and networks in the region. It should be clarified that for the purposes of this report, we only considered professionals from or residing in Central America.

RESULTS

Gender, age, country of origin and residence

A total of 35 people from Central America responded to this survey, with the majority being women (60%) between the ages of 30-34 years (37.14%) (Figures 1 and 2). Among the respondents, 42% were from Guatemala, followed by Costa Rica (26%), and both Honduras and El Salvador shared 12% each of the sample. The majority of respondents lived in their country of origin (85%), while 15% resided in the United States of America, Mexico, the United Kingdom and Spain (Figure 2). Only 15% of respondents said they

belonged to a local coastal community and no ECOP mentioned identifying themselves as belonging to an indigenous community.

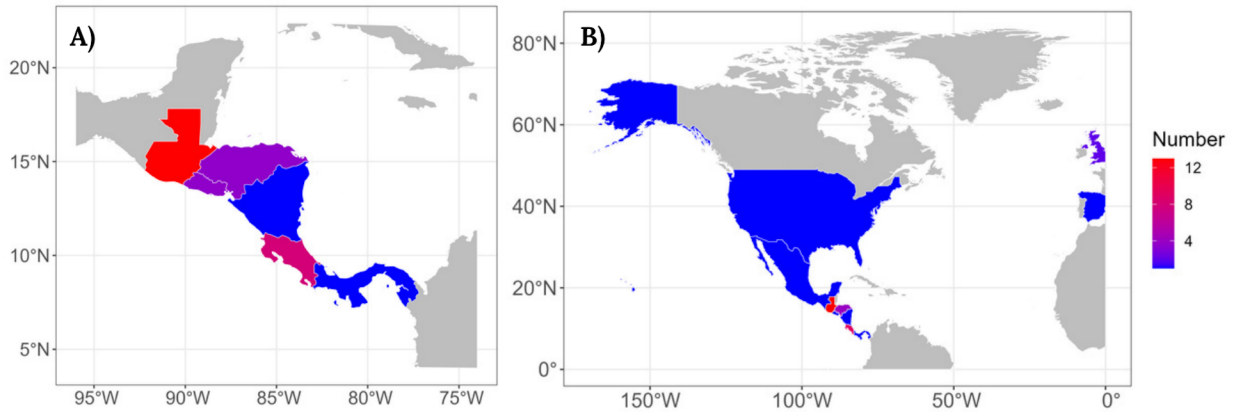


Figure 2: A) Nationality and B) place of residence of Central American ECOPs surveyed

Professional stage and area

Approximately 49% of the ECOPs interviewed mentioned working in marine science, while 23% in marine management, i.e. being part of academia and research institutions, as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations (Figure 3). The smallest share of ECOPs indicated working in ocean education (3%), ocean science communication (3%) and marine policy (3%), possibly reflecting the lack of opportunities in these fields. In terms of the professionalism of the Central American ECOPs, the majority were master's students or had already completed their master's studies (37%) and had between 1-6 years (66%) of experience. When asked if they were part of an early career ocean programme or professional network, only few of them indicated that they were part of such initiatives, however, most of them expressed their desire to be part of such a programme or network.

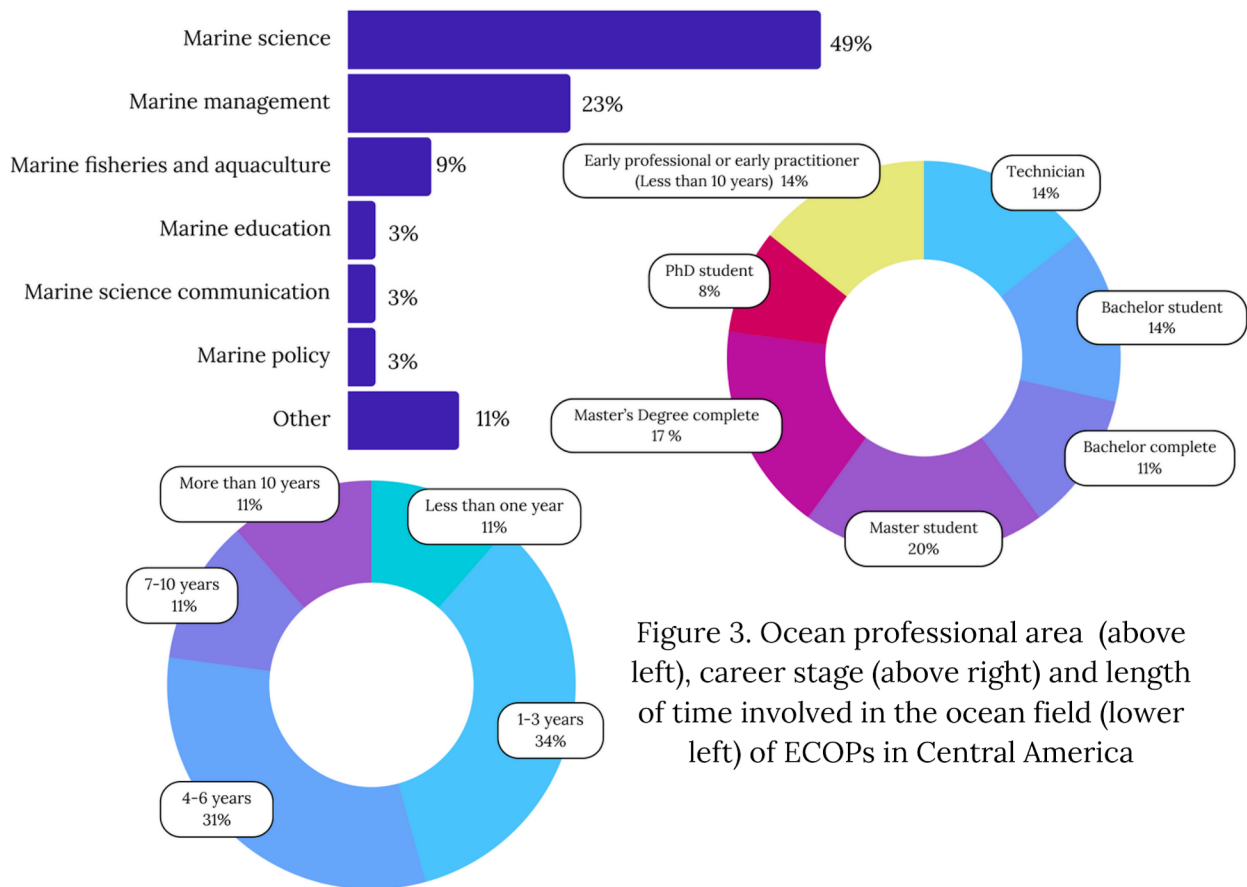


Figure 3. Ocean professional area (above left), career stage (above right) and length of time involved in the ocean field (lower left) of ECOPs in Central America

UN Ocean Decade and ECOP Programme

Respondents were asked how familiar they were with the UN Decade of Oceans and the ECOP Programme. 62.9% expressed knowledge of both initiatives, in contrast to 20% who are only familiar with the UN Decade of Oceans. 14.3% mentioned not knowing about either initiative, and a minority (2.95%) was not sure about this question (Figure 4). When asked about the Decade outcomes in which they participate, 57% of ECOPs in Central America are involved in more than one outcome of the Decade, with "A healthy and resilient ocean" being the most selected outcome (80%), followed by "A clean ocean" (49%), "A productive ocean" (40%), "An inspiring and engaging ocean" (23%), "A safe ocean" (20%), "An accessible ocean" (11%) and "A predicted ocean" (9%) (Figure 5).

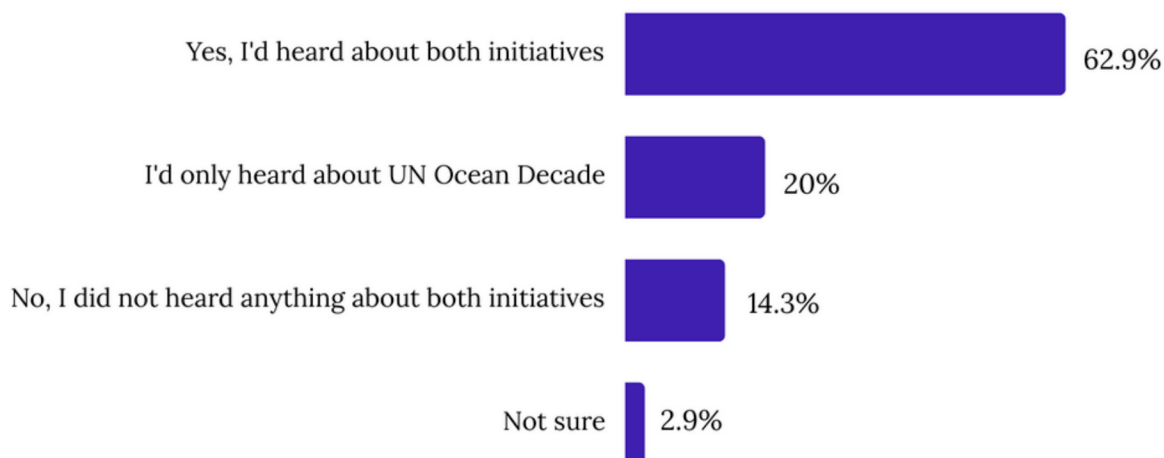


Figure 4. Respondents' familiarity with the UN Decade of Ocean Sciences and the ECOP Program

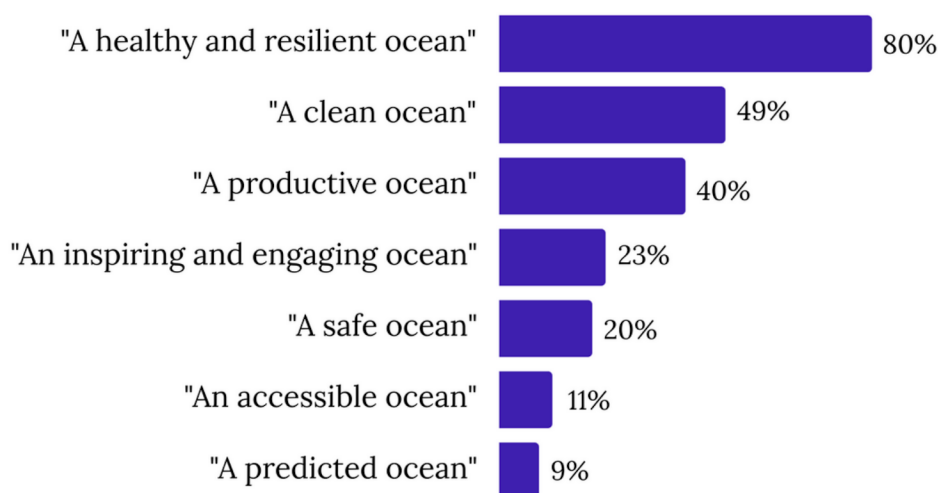


Figure 5. Outcomes of the UN Decade of Ocean Science with which Central American ECOPs are interested and/or involved

When asked about the challenges of the UN Decade of Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development that most interest them, the majority of respondents are interested in more than one challenge (86%). As can be seen in Figure 6, "Protecting and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity" is the challenge that was the most interesting to young professionals in the Central American region. Other frequent challenges included: "Developing a sustainable and equitable ocean economy" (54%), "Understanding and beating marine pollution", "Sustainable feeding the global population", "Increasing community resilience to ocean hazards" and "Changing humanity's relationship with the ocean" (40% respectively).

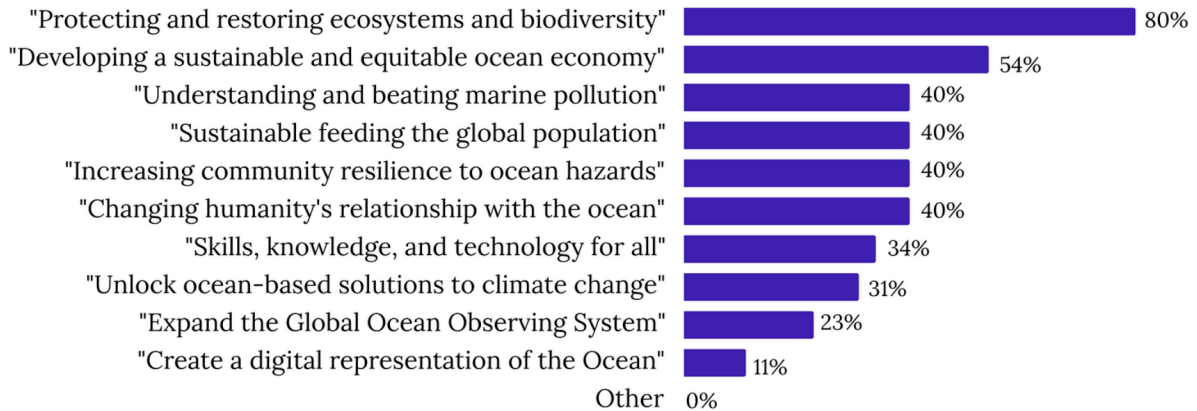


Figure 6. Primary challenges of the UN Ocean Decade for Central American ECOPs. More than one response was possible per ECOP

In response to the question about associations with the term “Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOP)”, respondents frequently mentioned words such as “Ocean”, “Opportunities”, “Youth”, “Activism”, and “Innovation” as depicted in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Words that respondents associate with “Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOP)”

ECOP Central America: challenges and vision

Central American ECOPs expressed that the lack of dissemination of professional and extracurricular opportunities is the biggest challenge they face (66%), followed by lack of funding for research activities (60%), low salaries or unpaid positions (60%), difficulty in finding a job in ocean sciences (57%), lack of a professional network (54%) and unemployment or unpaid activities in marine sciences (51%). These and other relevant challenges, also mentioned by respondents, can be seen in Figure 8.

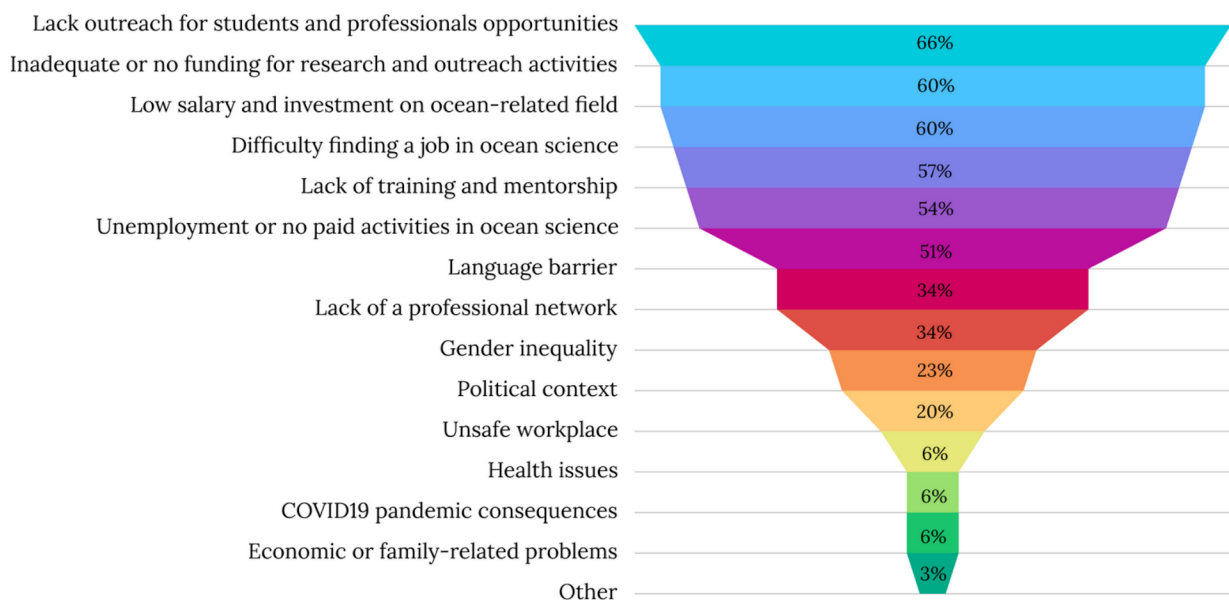


Figure 8. Challenges facing Early Career Youth in Central America

When ECOPs were asked about the areas they consider important for capacity building, 80% considered fundraising to be the most important area. Other priority areas for ECOPs in the region were also community (74%) and stakeholder engagement and project management (69%), followed by ocean conservation training (66%), ocean literacy, management and monitoring (60%), teaching and education (60%), blue economy (57%) and language (speaking and writing skills in another language, in this case English) (57%).

In addition, surveyed ECOPs considered it essential to financially support ECOPs in Central America for community and outreach activities (74%), research projects (69%), training development (66%) and for participation in ocean-related events (conferences, workshops, schools, etc) (54%). Financial support for publishing in scientific journals was considered necessary by 51%, funding for entrepreneurship projects by 45%, and funding for training, courses, conferences, negotiations, etc. at the science-policy interface by 43% (Figure 9).

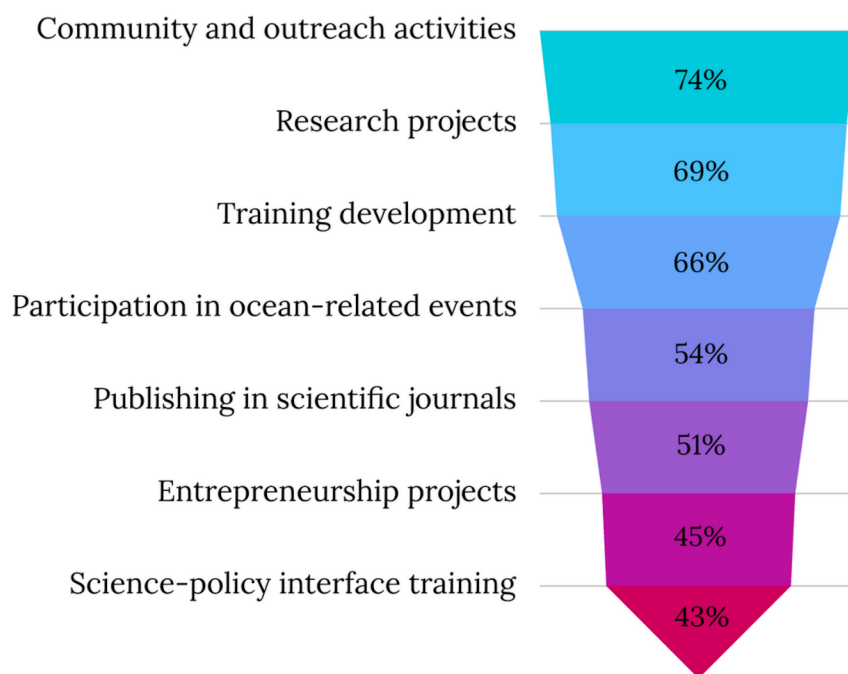


Figure 9. Aspects ECOPs consider a priority for financing in the Central American region

DISCUSSION

ECOP SURVEY

The survey helped to collect demographic data on ECOPs in the Central American region and to better understand their biggest challenges, issues of interest and needs. In terms of the country of origin, country of residence and level of education of the ECOPs surveyed, the majority resided in Central America and that most were currently pursuing or have already completed a Master's degree. Few ECOPs were living outside the region, very few were enrolled in a PhD or were completing a Postdoc. This can be interpreted as a consequence of aspects such as the lack of funding or opportunities for Central American ECOPs to continue their academic training, and how the language barrier (especially English) makes it difficult for Central American ECOPs to link with international ocean-related institutions or organisations abroad.

Another important aspect to consider would be the lack of mentoring and professional networks. The majority of ECOPs interviewed mentioned not being part of a professional network or initiative, however, they expressed their desire to be part of one. This could be a reflection of the limited supply of networking opportunities or the lack of dissemination of such initiatives for young professionals in this region. The sustainability of initiatives like these is hindered by a shortage of funding and is further influenced by the prevailing socio-political context; these factors should be considered when examining this phenomenon. We consider it important to highlight that the ECOP programme and SOA were the professional networks to which a minority of respondents said they belonged, reflecting the importance of both initiatives in the formation of the next generation of ocean leaders in the region.

The biggest challenges cited by the ECOPs surveyed were dissemination of opportunities, limited funding and language barrier constraints. The Central American node is addressing these challenges in the following ways:

- Dissemination of opportunities: through a monthly newsletter in which funding opportunities, conferences, workshops or other activities, scholarships, and job and training opportunities are shared. These opportunities are also shared through the Instagram account which helps to have faster and instant communication with ECOPs in the region.
- Limited funding: The node does not have the capacity to directly offer funding opportunities for ECOPs as it does not have its own funds. However, it indirectly seeks to share funding opportunities, such as the Future Earth opportunity, or to offer free training seminars and workshops.
- Language barrier: As a node we have organised seminars and training activities in the ECOPs' first language (Spanish). However, in order to ensure the participation of ECOPs in international events, we consider it essential to offer training opportunities in English.

According to the responses, the priority issue to address in the region is to create a resilient and equitable blue economy that ensures the food security of the population. To this end, ECOPs mentioned that it is necessary to do so through the protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems, which goes hand in hand with ocean literacy. The Central American ECOPs have shown great commitment and dedication to the protection and conservation of the oceans, even with great financial limitations and opportunities. We consider it essential to secure their future and thus ensure the ocean we want in the region.

Survey limitations

Because the survey was conducted online using new technologies, we think this may be an important reason why we did not get more responses to this survey. In Latin America (Central America being no exception), access to internet and computer equipment is often scarce in rural, coastal and/or remote areas due to lack of capital and infrastructure.

This could also explain why we obtained a low representation of people who identify with minority groups, which are commonly underrepresented in surveys or studies carried out in this region of the world, such as indigenous and/or coastal communities. It should also be noted that another relevant aspect that could allow us to explain this underrepresentation has to do with the low levels of schooling in this part of the population, which means that people belonging to these minority groups do not know how to read/write and/or do not have technological knowledge, so that even if they had access to a computer with internet access, they would not be able to respond to a survey like the one we applied and described in this document.

It is for the above reasons that we consider it important to generate strategies and policies for inclusion in this region. These minority groups possess ancestral knowledge and face socio-economic challenges, which are important when it comes to conserving and preserving the marine environment and its resources, within the framework of Agenda 2023 and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

NEXT STEPS

The greatest expectation for the region is undoubtedly the creation, strengthening and dissemination of new and existing professional networks, as well as the collaborative work between them and the generation of strategic alliances with other important sectors of the population such as governments, governmental and non-governmental organisations, educational and research institutions, as well as society in general, with representation of all human groups, with special emphasis on the inclusion of minority and/or under-represented groups. We believe that these actions would make it possible to overcome many of the challenges and difficulties that ECOPs face in Central America, by increasing access to information, the creation and implementation of projects, working groups for specific areas, the search for and management of funding, the creation of strategic alliances within and outside the academic sphere, the dissemination of research, initiatives, jobs and opportunities, as well as an increase in access to information.

To this end, the node aims to carry out the following activities in 2024:

- The continuation of regular activities of the node:
 1. A monthly newsletter to share opportunities and the activity of the node
 2. Webinars on topics relevant to ECOPs in the region
- An introductory course on data analysis in Python will be held for ECOPs in the region, from February 26 to March 19, 2024. This course will be given in English and Spanish, will be free of charge and will last three weeks.
- ECOP Central America will participate in the 2024 UN Ocean Decade Conference on 10-12 April 2024 in Barcelona, through the poster of the Central American node and the co-organisation of the satellite event: *“The inclusivity we need for the ocean we want”*.
- Extend the screening of the film *Deep Rising* to other Central American countries (Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Panama), in order to raise awareness of this issue of high importance worldwide. These screenings will also be accompanied by a discussion led by experts on the subject.
- A symposium of ECOPs and other actors in other relevant ocean areas will be organised in cooperation with the National University of Honduras in which ECOPs from Honduras and other Central American countries may participate.

Seminars, beach clean-ups and other activities will be organised at national and local level in the different countries of the region, in cooperation with universities and local initiatives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the hard work of the ECOP Central America coordination team without whose work this node would not be possible. In addition, we would like to thank all for the support of the global ECOP Programme, especially Evgeniia Kostianaia and Natalie Fox who give us essential support to create the ocean we want in the region.

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