

If a country is not very dependent on the ocean, can it have a Blue Economy? A brief interview with Joanna Smith of Nature United

Editor's note: Joanna Smith is director of ocean planning and mapping with Nature United, the Canadian affiliate of The Nature Conservancy. In this capacity, she is the Seychelles marine spatial planning (MSP) process and science lead. She splits her time between Canada, Seychelles, and other travels.

The Skimmer: How have you seen Blue Economy develop over recent years?

Smith: In 2012, the European Union introduced its "Blue Growth" platform. This platform was heavily focused on employment and creating jobs in new and emerging ocean sectors. It was a diversification of sorts to make up for shrinkage in other markets. Initially it did not have a sustainability focus per se, but in the following years, the word "sustainable" became more prominent.

To me, the "Blue Economy" was launched in 2014 by small island developing states (SIDS). It is a fundamentally different concept from Blue Growth in that it highlights the significance of the oceans for these nations in the context of ocean conservation, sustainable livelihoods, economic diversification, and maritime security. For many SIDS, a high percentage of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comes from marine sources – their economies truly are "blue". For these nations, Blue Economy is not just about diversifying their ocean economies (the parts of their national economies dependent on the ocean). It is also about increasing the resilience of their ocean economies, increasing maritime safety and security (from piracy and IUU), improving ocean management and food security, protecting the environment, and adapting to climate change.

The Skimmer: How do you see Blue Economy relating to ecosystem-based management (EBM)?

Smith: Some criticize Blue Economy as just another buzzword. But for developing countries that are trying to "grow" their economy and move up in the World Bank rankings or achieve some other economic status, EBM frameworks left them with questions of how they could do this without harming the environment – it just didn't offer enough of a roadmap for development.

So I think the Blue Economy concept is something of a response to gaps in EBM. Traditional macroeconomic models, for example, have likely failed to help developing countries grow or manage growth. So maybe Blue Economy roadmaps can help these countries account for all the missing information in economic models (e.g., Supply Use Tables) and find a sustainable path forward. For example, I think the externalities – such as loss or destruction of ocean resources – that are not accounted for in macroeconomic models are a bigger deal if an economy relies on these resources versus an economy when oceans are a minor contributor.

There have also been criticisms of the Blue Economy concept as simply "greenwashing" economic development and paying lip service to sustainability. I don't think it is greenwashing for SIDS, however. Sustainability creates real concerns for people living near the ocean and depending on it for their livelihood. In Seychelles, for example, 66% of GDP comes from ocean sources, directly or indirectly. Again, it is literally a blue economy.

The Skimmer: So you refer to SIDS whose economies are very heavily dependent on the ocean. Can other countries also have Blue Economies?

Smith: This is when I think the Blue Economy concept gets tricky – when it is adopted by large, developed countries where marine sectors are a small fraction of the total economy or where only a small proportion of the population depends on the ocean for cultural and social values. Are these "Blue Economies"? Should there be a minimum threshold for economic reliance

on the ocean for an economy to be considered “blue”? Maybe it is best to allow for broad definitions or applications of this concept and just not lose sight of the particular importance and significance of healthy oceans for SIDS and small coastal nations.

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