



Implementing the Strategic Action Programme for the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand (SCS SAP Project)

Second Meeting of the Regional Working Group on Coral Reef and Seagrass Beds

Iloilo City, Philippines 11-12 August 2025

Integration of the SCS-SAP Regional Working Groups on Habitats with the COBSEA Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems



INTRODUCTION

Since the UNEP/GEF Project “Reversing Environmental Degradation Trends in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand” implemented in 2002-2009, Regional Working Groups (RWG) on Mangroves, Coral Reefs, Seagrass Beds, and Coastal Wetlands were established to coordinate national implementation of project activities across the four habitats and serve as a mechanism for information exchange, coordination, and discussion at the regional level. The succeeding UNEP/GEF/UNOPS “Implementing the Strategic Action Programme for the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand” (SCS SAP Project) sustained these Regional Working Groups. They provide expertise in habitats management, document implementation of the Strategic Action Programme, as well as support in the development of the new Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA) and Strategic Action Programme (SAP).

The Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) is a regional intergovernmental mechanism bringing together nine countries (Cambodia, People’s Republic of China, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Viet Nam) in development and protection of the marine environment and coastal areas of East Asian Seas. It was established through the East Asian Seas Action Plan 1981 and revised in 1994. The COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting (IGM) is the sole decision-making body of COBSEA that adopts high-level decisions, including adoption of Strategic Directions and regional frameworks, biennial budgets and workplans, and major projects. IGMs take place biennially (with extraordinary Meetings as needed) and follow United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) Rules and Procedures. It is one of 18 Regional Seas programmes (7 of which are administered by UNEP) and is hosted in Bangkok, Thailand.

RATIONALE

With the SCS-SAP Project anticipated to end in December 2026, the expertise and experiences of the RWG must be sustained and maintained, providing a rich source of knowledge and information for the continued management and conservation of the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand Large Marine Ecosystems, as well as its transboundary implications to the rest of the East Asian Seas.

In April 2023, COBSEA Participating countries adopted the COBSEA Marine and Coastal Ecosystem Framework, which guides regional activities on biodiversity and ecosystems conservation, and further established the COBSEA Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems (WGMCE). Since its establishment, the SCS-SAP Project has supported and has served as observers in the Meetings of the WGMCE (WGMCE-1, Bali, September 2023; WGMCE-2, Siem Reap, October 2024). As an institutional structure within COBSEA, the WGMCE can provide an opportunity for the RWG to be sustained to the extent possible. Given the breadth of disciplines that are needed to address contemporaneous environmental issues, having a pool of experts, such as from the scientific community and other key practitioners, broadens access to knowledge, information, and up-to-date best practices and the RWG provides such a direct opportunity. Several options for integration are presented herein:

Given the transitioning period of the SCS SAP Project, the upcoming Third Meeting of the COBSEA Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems (WGMCE-3), to be held on the 13 August 2025, back-to-back with the Second RWG Meeting on 11-12 August 2025 is an opportunity to discuss the integration of the RWG to the WGMCE. This will later be presented in the Twenty-seventh Intergovernmental Meeting of COBSEA (IGM 27) scheduled to take place in the second half of 2026.

INTEGRATION OF THE SCS-SAP REGIONAL WORKING GROUPS OF HABITATS WITH THE COBSEA WORKING GROUP ON MARINE AND COASTAL ECOSYSTEMS

Participation in the COBSEA WGMCE is indicated in Annex 3: Terms of Reference of Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems as pertained in the [COBSEA Marine and Coastal Ecosystems Framework](#):

COBSEA participating countries shall be invited to participate in the COBSEA Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems through nomination of 2-3 Working Group focal points. The Working Group focal points should represent the national agency with lead or coordinating responsibility at the national level regarding marine and coastal ecosystems and should have relevant experience and expertise on the different scope of this Framework. COBSEA participating countries may also nominate additional experts to attend Working Group meetings, to ensure that the full range of national expertise and interest is brought to the Working Group, and to enable the Working Group to take into consideration the multiple dimensions of governance of the marine and coastal ecosystems.

Relevant United Nations bodies and specialized agencies, intergovernmental organizations, as well as relevant regional bodies and organizations concerned with marine and coastal ecosystems, may be invited to participate in Working Group meetings as observers. Local authorities, private sector entities and non-governmental organizations may be invited to participate as observers on recommendation by Working Group focal points. Observers may, upon invitation of the Working Group members, make contributions on matters being discussed in the meeting and within the scope of their activities and expertise. Certain meeting discussions may be limited only to representatives of COBSEA participating countries.

Additionally, the First Meeting of the Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems recommended that (UNEP/COBSEA WGMCE 1/7, Page 14) :

Additional experts. When relevant to the agenda, the Secretariat will be able to invite experts to join in the Working Group meetings to share insights and guidance based on their expertise on a certain topic. For experts that are invited by WGMCE members, a list of experts would be sent to the National Focal Points for their review on the credentials of the proposed experts. The NFPs would be given two weeks to review the experts and to comment if an expert should not be invited. The NFPs would also be encouraged to nominate their experts to join WGMCE meeting.

Finally, as the full range of expertise in the RWG, with 4 habitats and 6 countries, cannot be accommodated within the COBSEA WGMCE, the RWG together with the COBSEA Secretariat, must find a system on how they can be represented in the WGMCE. The next two years in which SCS SAP is still in implementation would be uncomplicated, with each of the Chairs of the 4 habitats being invited. At the end of SCS SAP Project, who sits as Chair and how information is disseminated and discussed across the SCS/GOT LMEs RWG are not as clear.

While there is no current existing provision for the WGMCE on expert groups, the COBSEA Working Group on Marine Litter (WGML) has established an Expert Group on Marine Litter Monitoring which provides specific scientific expertise and advice on marine litter monitoring programmes. An option to establish the RWG as a WGMCE Expert Group may likewise be considered. They will be tasked with the role of providing scientific and technical services to the WGMCE focused on coral reef, mangroves, seagrass, and coastal wetlands.

These provisions provide several options for the RWG to be integrated into the COBSEA Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems. The RWG are requested to consider and provide feedback during the meeting on which option to undertake, or possible integration of several options.:

- 1) Nominated by the country as an expert
- 2) Invited as observers considering the mandate and knowledge on marine and coastal ecosystems
- 3) Invited by the COBSEA Secretariat to participate
- 4) Establish the RWG as the COBSEA Expert Group on Habitat Conservation