



ProBleu

Promoting Ocean and water literacy
in school communities

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Deliverable D6.5

Policy Brief on Blue Schools

“Recommendations to grow the Network of European Blue Schools and Ocean & Freshwater Literacy across Europe

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Summary

This report has been compiled by the Ocean Conservation Trust on behalf of the ProBleu consortium. It outlines the evolution, and current shape, of Ocean Literacy theory, and the operation of the Network of European Blue Schools (NEBS). Selected case studies are provided on the 111 school-based programmes of work supported by ProBleu, which have contributed directly to the growth of the NEBS.

The report includes a series of recommendations setting out how Ocean and Freshwater Literacy, fostered locally, nationally and through the NEBS can address environmental, economic and societal challenges across Europe.

List of Abbreviations

BIAZA - British & Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums

DG MARE - Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

EC - European Commission

EMSEA - European Marine Science Educators Association

EU - European Union

ICM-CSIC - Institute of Marine Sciences

KTU - Kaunas University of Technology

NEBS - Network of European Blue Schools

OCT - Ocean Conservation Trust

PML - Plymouth Marine Labs

1. Introduction

The Ocean covers 71% of the Earth's surface, and represents more than 99% of the living space of our planet. It is widely credited as the origin of life on Earth, and recognised as a key life support system for the planet as a whole. Its vast size, depth and unique physical properties have led some to believe that it exists in a perennial, unchanging state; unimpacted by our rapidly growing global population. Modern science understands that this is not the case; the Ocean and humans are inextricably linked, and that for both to thrive, we will need to transform the relationship we have with the Ocean: we will need to transition into a society that understands, values, and cares for the Ocean. This report explores the opportunities to begin this transformation in Europe through the Network of European Blue Schools (NEBS) [Network of Blue Schools | Little waves make a big ocean.](#)

1.1. Ocean Literacy

The term Ocean Literacy was originally coined by a group of Ocean Scientists in the US during the early 2000's. They defined a set of seven 'literacy principles' which, along with their associated sub-principles, outlined a core understanding of the Ocean. Those principles remain unchanged today. They are:

1. Earth has one Ocean with many features
2. The Ocean and life in the Ocean shape the features of Earth.
3. The Ocean is a major influence on weather and climate.
4. The Ocean makes Earth habitable.
5. The Ocean supports a great diversity of life and ecosystems.
6. The Ocean and humans are inextricably linked.
7. The Ocean is largely unexplored.

In 2013, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration advanced the Ocean Literacy concept by developing a definition which is still widely used today:

“Ocean Literacy is an understanding of the Ocean's influence on you - and your influence on the Ocean. An Ocean Literate person:

1. Understands the importance of the Ocean to humankind
2. Can communicate about the Ocean in a meaningful way
3. Is able to make informed and responsible decisions regarding the Ocean and its resources”

In 2023, Brennan et al, published work documenting that became a further milestone in the evolution of Ocean Literacy theory. Their work introduced 'dimensions' of Ocean Literacy, which included the knowledge principle concept originally set out at the inception of the term Ocean Literacy, along with five other areas. Brennan's 6 dimensions are as follows:

1. *Awareness as the basic knowledge that a situation, problem or concept exists.*

2. *Knowledge is what a person knows about an Ocean related topic and the links between topics.*
3. *Attitude is related to a level of agreement with or concern for a particular position.*
4. *Communication is the extent to which a person communicates with others, such as family and peer groups, on Ocean related topics.*
5. *Behaviour relates to decisions, choices, actions, and habits with respect to Ocean related issues.*
6. *Activism is the degree to which a person engages in activities such as campaigning (for example through social media) to bring about changes in policy, attitudes, behaviour, etc.*

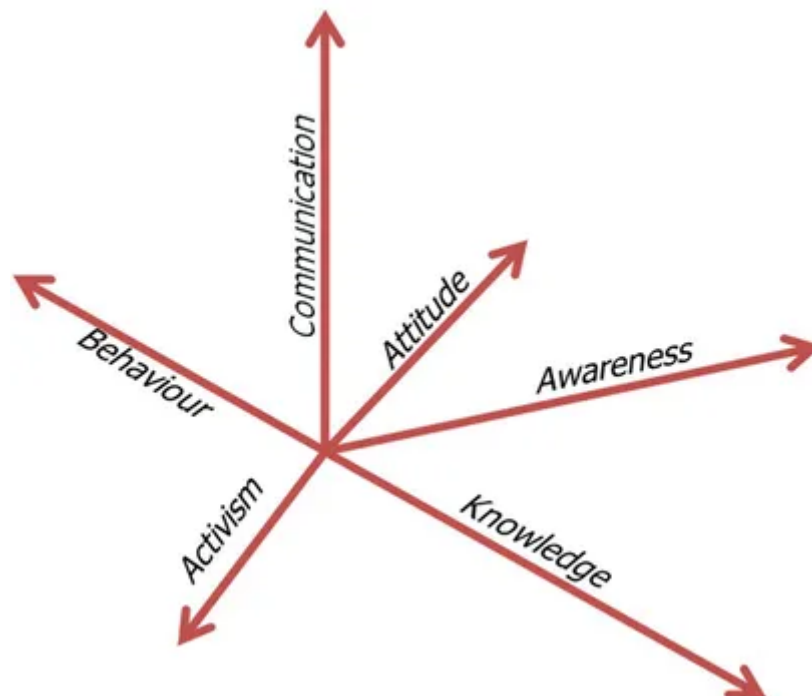


Figure 1. The Ocean Literacy dimensions. McKinley et al (2023)

Since the publication of Brennan's 6 dimensions of Ocean Literacy, there have been a number of other proposals exploring additional dimensions, including trust, experience and emotion. A common emerging thread in modern Ocean Literacy theory is that, in light of its expanding dimensions, Ocean Literacy is perhaps best viewed as an outcome – a society that understands, values, and cares for the Ocean.

1.2. The need for Ocean Literacy

Why then, is there a need for society to understand, value and care for the Ocean?

Sea level rise, coastal storms, increasing marine litter, marine biodiversity loss, destruction of fisheries across the globe, Ocean acidification and deoxygenation are becoming increasingly familiar issues around the globe. *IOC Ocean Literacy for All - A Toolkit (2017)*.

The impact of these issues is felt around the world, with many low lying and coastal communities directly affected by sea level rise and coastal storms. Changes in associated weather patterns are currently being felt in every corner of the world, potentially impacting food productivity, economic and national security in every country on earth.

Ocean acidification and deoxygenation, whilst not immediately obvious to the casual observer, present equally significant threats to the Ocean and humanity as a whole; changes to the delicate physical and chemical balance of the Ocean will have profound impacts on the stability and structure of the ecosystems it supports, and to the services it provides society as a whole.

In almost all cases, these issues can be attributed to human behaviour around the world; either as a direct consequence or as a secondary effect, resultant from another human behaviour.

In its earliest incarnations, Ocean Literacy set out to define the core knowledge concepts required to ensure a person understood the significance and importance of the Ocean, as a means to inspire the necessary behaviour change to reverse the global decline in Ocean health. A significant and dramatic shift in society's relationship with the Ocean is now required in order to move the dial on human behaviour towards a more Ocean-positive, sustainable approach wherein human values and subsequent behaviours reduce, rather than accelerate, the global challenges we face.

The evolution of Ocean Literacy theory, which has followed, has built on this concept to the point that Ocean Literacy today is more than just educating or informing the public and maritime stakeholders about the importance of the Ocean. It carries us to an outcome where society makes informed and responsible decisions on Ocean resources and Ocean sustainability. - *IOC Ocean Literacy for All - A Toolkit (2017)*.

1.3. The Network of European Blue Schools (NEBS)

The Network of European Blue Schools (NEBS) is a pan-European initiative, part of the EU4Ocean Coalition, supported by the European Commission (DG MARE), initially established in 2020 with a membership of 40 schools from 12 countries. It evolved from marine education expertise gathered from consultations with teachers and educators across Europe.

The NEBS has three main goals:

- *Create a more Ocean-literate society where schools become agents for change and sustainability*
- *Build bridges between Ocean professionals and schools*
- *Set up a network where teachers can share experiences and collaborate with other schools, nationally and internationally ([Network of Blue Schools | Little waves make a big Ocean!](#))*

To become a “European Blue School,” a school must submit a project meeting a set of criteria (e.g., involve students, produce a clear output, collaborate with a local partner, communicate results) and is then awarded a certificate.

The NEBS is much more than a badge for schools however; each project completed contributes to the bank of inspirational resources including fully editable project plans, presentations, graphics, templates and instructional videos. These resources are made freely available in multiple languages on the NEBS and associated mission project websites, allowing teachers across Europe to replicate, build on or adapt to their geographic and cultural contexts. The NEBS serves as a gateway for teachers to connect with schools, communities and professionals across the continent. By connecting students to their peers in other countries and to communities outside the school, it opens a world of opportunities for learning across the curriculum. The relationship of the Ocean with humankind encompasses all areas of society, and the NEBS supports and celebrates this relationship without borders.

The growth of the NEBS has been supported by the work of three EU Mission “Restore our Ocean and Waters” projects: SHORE, BlueLightS and ProBleu. Together, these consortia have helped to grow NEBS membership to over 1,300 schools from EU and associated countries.

2. Consortium partnerships

In 2022, Horizon Europe launched a call for initiatives to support the growth of the Network of European Blue Schools. Three different consortia were awarded funding, and each took a slightly different approach to developing the NEBS. An overview of each is provided below:

2.1. ProBleu

The ProBleu consortium comprises six partners; The Ocean Conservation Trust (OCT); The Spanish National Research Council (CSIC); Earthwatch; INOVA+; Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) and Plymouth Marine Laboratory (PML). Each partner brings a unique skillset and network to the consortium, enabling the delivery of the work as a whole.

ProBleu is an EU-funded Horizon Europe project coordinated by the Institute of Marine Sciences (ICM-CSIC, Barcelona). Its mission is to foster Ocean and freshwater literacy in school communities, especially by supporting and expanding the Network of European Blue

Schools (NEBS). This aligns with the Mission “Restore our Ocean and Waters” which has the stated goal of restoring the health of the EU's Ocean, seas, and waters by 2030. The project emphasises open schooling, encouraging schools to co-create learning activities with their broader communities (e.g., local stakeholders, scientists) by distributing grants of up to €10,000 to support delivery of projects that last up to 12 months. Schools that receive ProBleu funding and deliver their projects are automatically accredited as European Blue Schools, tying the project directly to the growth of the NEBS.

Through the four funding calls issued by ProBleu, a total of 636 project applications were received. Distribution of these applications across Europe is not even, ranging from countries with a single application to those with over 100. Of these, 115 projects were awarded funding, directly increasing NEBS membership by the same number of schools. As well as this, the ProBleu project has also developed a digital catalogue of accessible resources (e.g., teaching aids, citizen science tools) that are freely available to all– helping scale up Ocean and water literacy even in schools not directly funded.

The expected impacts of the ProBleu project on Ocean Literacy levels across Europe can be broadly classified under three topics, as outlined in the DoA for ProBleu WP6, as follows:

Societal impacts:

- Increased Ocean and water literacy in the European population, with individuals and communities behaving more responsibly towards aquatic environments
- Network of Blue Schools ten times larger at the end of the project, with 300 schools using ProBleu resources
- Sustained growth of the Network beyond the end of the project through a concrete sustainability plan

Scientific impacts:

- Funded school projects contributing to protecting marine and freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity and preventing and eliminating pollution
- Ocean and water literacy contributing to preventing pollution

Economic impacts

- Disadvantaged schools join the NEBS through the use of ProBleu resources
- Improved local blue economy through contributions to the Mission objectives

2.2. SHORE

SHORE's primary mission is to enhance Ocean Literacy and to actively engage with students and teachers from 100 schools across five distinct regions: Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Danube River, and Rhine River. The project provides grants of up to 10,000

euros, and tools to increase Ocean literacy and restore the health of our Ocean and waters. SHORE serves as a comprehensive resource hub and a bridge between researchers, local stakeholders, and schools in the regional areas.

Objectives:

- Empower youth to become agents of change
- Expand the Network of European Blue Schools;
- Promote the EU's Mission Ocean objectives
- Promote open schooling methodologies
- Implement the blue curricula internationally
- Train professional educators on blue education.

2.3. BlueLightS

Sister project of ProBleu and SHORE, BlueLightS aims at strengthening the attention given to Ocean and river sustainability (i.e. the *Blue*) in the education systems of European countries. It builds on three pillars: (1) the setting up and facilitation of a Blue Education platform, bringing together stakeholders from the education and Ocean/river sustainability communities to share experiences and resources, identify challenges and bottlenecks and develop collective solutions; (2) the development of a framework for mainstreaming blue education in Europe building on a series of experimentations in selected (9) EU Member states as well as webinars and co-building workshops; (3) (financial and professional) support to the development and implementation of Blue challenge projects in European schools that enhance the Ocean and river sustainability literacy of children/pupils.

3. Impact Case Studies

ProBleu has supported schools across Europe to deliver projects relating to a broad range of topics - from plastic pollution in local waterways to protected species mapping in coastal environments. Every project aspires to create a lasting legacy which will go on to positively impact the schools and communities long after the funded work period concludes. In this way, the ProBleu project is contributing towards a sustainable and lasting change in society's relationship with the Ocean and our freshwater resources.

The case studies below have been selected to illustrate the diversity of ages, disciplines, geographies and cultural contexts that ProBleu has been able to support by enriching existing curricula with high value experiences. This highlights the universal value of connecting students across Europe to the Ocean.

3.1. Blue fishing vessel (Trapani, Italy)

- School: IIs Leonardo da Vinci
- Student age: Secondary (14-16)
- Topic: *Posidonia oceanica*
- Environment: Marine

The school has launched a vital project centered on protection and enhancement of *Posidonia oceanica*, a crucial marine plant endemic to the Mediterranean. This initiative aims to educate and engage students and citizens alike, highlighting the plant's indispensable role in water quality and climate regulation. By combining citizen science with targeted awareness campaigns, the project strives to foster a deeper understanding and active participation in marine ecosystem preservation.

Objectives:

- Educate: To inform students about the ecological importance of *Posidonia Oceanica* and the goals of the EU Mission “Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030.”
- Promote Responsibility: To encourage active participation in ecosystem protection through mapping, clean-ups, and data collection.
- Raise Awareness: To inform the broader community through informative graphic panels and public installations, emphasizing *Posidonia*'s environmental value.

Outputs and Impact:

- Includes the family of the students, & the community, create widespread impact.
- Increased student awareness of marine ecosystems and *Posidonia*'s role.
- Active participation in citizen science activities, fostering of responsibility.
- Public awareness through informative panels and installations.
- Data collection and dissemination to institutional bodies.
- Educational resources, including mapping data, waste collection sheets, and multimedia content.



3.2. Wetland Guardians & Protectors (Patras, Greece)

- School: 50th Primary School of Patras
- Student age: Primary (6-11)
- Topic: Wetlands
- Environment: Fresh & marine water

The project “Wetland Guardians and Protectors” aims to educate students about the value of wetlands, promote sustainable practices, and implement actions for their protection. Spanning nine months, this initiative engages students in research, conservation efforts, and creative projects to foster environmental responsibility.

Objectives:

- Raise awareness about the importance of wetlands.
- Promote sustainable practices within the school and community.
- Implement actions to protect & preserve wetlands.

Outputs:

- Educational materials, including books, articles, and VR tools.
- Equipment for field visits, such as binoculars and sampling tools.
- Creative materials for posters, presentations, and artwork.
- A PowerPoint presentation detailing student actions and research findings.
- A blog to communicate and share student activities with the community.



The students had the opportunity to come into contact with the natural environment and observe the flora and fauna of Strofilia Forest-Kotyhi Lagoon where they obtained interesting information about the lagoon and the most important species that live there.

As part of the experience, they observed birds with telescopes, enhancing their understanding of the rich biodiversity of the area. They were then guided to the point where the sea joins the lagoon, an important ecological site.

During the visit, the students engaged in hands-on activities. They recorded species and their numbers, contributing to biodiversity monitoring. Additionally, they participated in an environmental action by collecting and recording waste, reinforcing their awareness of the importance of conservation efforts.

3.3. Flowing Together: Empowering efforts to revitalize the Fan River! (Rreshen, Albania)

- School: Pashko Vasa
- Student age: Primary (6-11)
- Topic: River restoration
- Environment: Fresh water

The “Flowing Together” project aims to empower students to address real-world environmental challenges, focusing on the revitalization of the Fan River. By promoting water and environmental conservation, the project fosters leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills through hands-on learning and community engagement.

Objectives:

- Enhance student understanding of water resources.
- Foster responsibility for protecting water ecosystems.
- Engage students in water conservation efforts.

Activities:

- Research on Fan River’s ecology and health.
- Water quality testing and analysis.
- Collaboration with local organizations and government for sustainable solutions.
- Educational workshops and community engagement programs.
- Field trips for habitat restoration.
- Art projects to express an understanding of river ecosystems.



Outputs:

- Resources and artwork promoting conservation.
- Real-time water quality data accessible to the public.
- Educational materials and lesson plans for other schools.
- Community workshops and restoration activities.
- Artistic expressions like murals, sculptures, and poetry.

3.4. The ABC of Baltic Sea Literacy (Espoo, Finland)

- School: Otaniemi Upper Secondary School
- Student age: Secondary (11-16)
- Topic: Sea Literacy
- Environment: Marine

The Baltic Sea is a unique and vital ecosystem that deserves our attention and understanding. However, marine knowledge and literacy are often missing from high school curriculums, leaving students with limited exposure to the complexities of their surrounding marine environment. To bridge this gap, our project, “The ABC of Baltic Sea Literacy,” aims to create a ready-made task package for high school students and teachers to use in Baltic Sea ecology field courses.

This initiative, developed in collaboration with teachers, researchers, and students, seeks to enhance marine literacy through hands-on learning experiences. By providing standardised educational materials, we hope to inspire schools across Finland to incorporate marine studies into their teaching programs

Objectives:

- Creating high-quality task cards that guide students through ecological sampling and biodiversity studies.
- Providing teachers with the necessary materials and training to facilitate Baltic Sea field courses.
- Standardising field course content across different schools, ensuring a cohesive and effective approach to marine education.
- Making the educational materials freely available online for all Finnish high schools

Outputs:

- A comprehensive task package with activity guides, sample analyses, and teacher instructions.
- A training program for teachers to enhance their confidence in delivering marine ecology lessons.
- An online repository on Lukemaverkosto.fi for free and open access to all Finnish high schools.



4. Recommendations

The outputs of the ProBleu and its sister projects directly target students and educators; the project and toolkits align with a number of national and international targets.

For students and educators – wider impact can be achieved by both the growth of the NEBS through engagement and promotion by its members, and the promotion and increased access to the toolkits created.

There is a strong need to engage with policymakers to both bring awareness to what the projects have achieved, but also to aid the sustainability of the NEBS and its contributions to national and international targets. For this to be achieved, policymakers need to support educators and educational systems to enable motivation, capability and opportunity to take up projects such as ProBleu, to embed Ocean literacy within European education.

The increase of Blue Schools, and those able to access Blue Education, ensures the increase of Ocean and water literacy, which will enable all students to understand their role within Ocean and water health, and what action they can take to engage.

Whilst the ProBleu project is entering its final stages to evaluate and review the impacts and successes of the project alongside the sister projects, possible policy themes and suggested targets are explored below. As part of this deliverable, there will be a policy brief report to the European Commission (EC) which will put forward the case for select calls for action in the following themes.

4.1. Education

Through ProBleu and the NEBS, schools have explored Ocean and freshwater topics across disciplines, age groups, and settings with local and relevant context. This supports the EU's goal to shift from fragmented environmental education to comprehensive, interdisciplinary sustainability learning. These approaches align with international guidance, such as the goals within the EU's targets for wellbeing in the *Green Deal* and the need for environmental education within the report *Education for Environmental Sustainability*, and education within the *Learning for the Green Transition*, and the EC's *Charter for Blue Education*. This also has crossover with United Nations (UN) work in the UN's Ocean Decade for Sustainable Development Vision 2030 work, specifically achieving outcomes contained within Challenge 10 White Paper, which emphasises education and literacy are crucial to restoring society's relationship with the Ocean and fostering lasting behavioural change.

Recommendations:

- Recognition of Ocean and freshwater literacy as a priority thematic strand within EU guidance on education.
- Recognise that engagement with the NEBS presents a significant Continuous Professional Development opportunity for teachers, facilitating positive impact on all disciplines and topics.

- Support the sharing of knowledge by directing schools and educators to the NEBS.
- Call for a need for all formal education systems to include elements of Ocean and freshwater literacy in the curriculum.
- The teaching of Ocean literacy in schools becomes a required metric during reporting within the European Education Area.

4.2. Increasing Ocean Literacy

The EU Mission “Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030” recognises Ocean and water literacy as a critical enabler for achieving its objectives, alongside research, innovation, and governance. Education and citizen engagement are explicitly identified as cross-cutting actions necessary to ensure long-term societal support for restoration and protection efforts of Blue spaces and beyond.

ProBleu contributes directly to this Mission by building literacy, skills, and agency among young people and educators, fostering a generation that understands water systems and is equipped to support Mission objectives in their communities. The NEBS provides a scalable, cost-effective mechanism for embedding Mission goals into formal education, complementing research and innovation investments with sustained cultural and behavioural change.

Recommendations:

- Recognise the NEBS as a supporting mechanism for the EU Mission on Ocean and Waters.
- Actively support and utilise findings and recommendations from ProBleu and its sister projects’ policy briefs in decision-making.
- Utilise all materials and toolkits created for the NEBS in all networks and goals that require the development of Ocean Literacy pathways.
- Embed signposting to the NEBS and toolkit websites within all appropriate EU sites.

4.3. Funding

The EU has directly supported the creation of ProBleu and the NEBS through its funding (Horizon Europe) that has allowed the project development. Marine conservation, education and development are critically underfunded. The NEBS has aimed to prevent costs being a barrier to participation with hundreds of free resources from across Europe.

Recommendations:

- Create funding for teacher training and knowledge transfer.
- Create funding for development of more sustainable Ocean and fresh water literacy projects such as ProBleu.
- Help identify knowledge gaps in order to create future funding calls.
- Consult with organisations such as OCT and the NEBS when considering funding gaps and opportunities.

4.4. Blue Skills and the Blue Economy

EU policy on the blue economy emphasises skills and career development, recognising the need for Ocean literacy to be embedded and the inclusion of educational pathways that feed into future sustainable jobs. Ocean and water literacy supports more than environmental education, it fosters a connection to the Ocean and freshwater systems which can expose student aspirations to aquatic careers.

By engaging learners early, Blue Schools embed foundations in order to develop students with interest aligned with EU priorities in marine science, renewable energy, fisheries, aquaculture, coastal management, and climate adaptation. Blue Education thus serves not only as environmental awareness but as a strategic investment in Europe's future workforce.

Recommendations:

- Support the integration of Ocean and fresh water literacy into education systems across all topics.
- Support student exposure to context-specific Ocean and fresh water careers.
- Funders understand and value the role that Ocean literacy, social science, and communication play in achieving global Ocean health targets.

4.5. Sustainable Development

The Ocean Decade Challenge 10 White Paper highlights that restoring society's relationship with the Ocean requires long-term investment in education, literacy, and social connection to nature. It identifies educators, policymakers, youth, and communities as priority user groups whose needs must be addressed to achieve systemic change.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers make Ocean-positive decisions in response to demonstrative public support for actions that protect the Ocean and appeal to the public to garner support.
- Policymakers understand and value the role of the Ocean in human life and recognise the impact of their decisions on the functioning of the Ocean.
- Ocean topics need to be included in the design of curriculums and textbooks.
- The EU needs to support high level interventions with leaders in education throughout the world.

5. Conclusion

Ocean and fresh water literacy are essential to achieving Europe's environmental, social, and economic ambitions. ProBleu and the NEBS demonstrate how EU policy goals can be translated into meaningful action in classrooms and communities across Europe. Sustained

policy support for Blue Education will strengthen Europe's capacity to address climate change, biodiversity loss, and water challenges while empowering future generations to act as informed, engaged marine citizens, stewards of our Ocean and freshwater systems.

There will be a call from ProBleu and the supporting sister projects to the EC in the form of policy briefs focusing on the four themes and supporting wider calls on the EC.

With these in place, the legacy and sustained inclusion of the Ocean with education, the impact as demonstrated by the project needs and resulting outputs, can contribute to achieving goals within local, national and international environmental and societal targets.

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