S2S PLATFORM

Source-to-Sea Action Platform

2026-2030 Strategy



Connectivity for Action

Accelerating Source-to-Sea Solutions for Climate, Nature, and Sustainable Development

Foreword

We are living through a defining decade. The choices made between now and 2030 will shape the future of our climate, biodiversity, freshwater resources, oceans, and the communities that depend on them. Around the world, governments, institutions, practitioners and communities are responding to increasingly interconnected challenges, including climate change, ecosystem degradation, pollution, water insecurity and mounting pressures on natural resources. Yet these challenges do not recognise sectoral or management boundaries. Water, land, coasts, oceans, ecosystems and people remain deeply interconnected, and our solutions must be equally integrated.

The Source to Sea Platform was established on a simple but powerful conviction: lasting solutions emerge when we work across the entire land-freshwater-coastal-marine continuum. Since 2014, the Platform has brought together a diverse community of partners to bridge freshwater and ocean agendas, advance source-to-see thinking in policy processes, and demonstrate the value of collaboration across disciplines, institutions and sectors. Together, we have helped move source-to-sea from an emerging concept to a recognised framework for integrated action.

Today, recognition alone is no longer enough. The coming years demand a shift from dialogue to implementation, from isolated initiatives to coordinated action, and from fragmented interventions to systemic change. Embedding source-to-sea approaches into policies, investments, governance systems and partnerships can contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, stronger climate action, biodiversity conservation, and more resilient communities and ecosystems.

This Strategy reflects that ambition while reaffirming a fundamental principle: the strength of the Source to Sea Platform lies in its partners. The Platform is not intended to be a centralised institution, but a collaborative mechanism that enables organisations to align their expertise, leadership and resources around shared opportunities while advancing their own priorities. A lean and adaptive implementation model will support partners to collaborate more effectively, accelerate action and maximise collective impact.

No single organisation can deliver source-to-sea transformation alone. Together, however, this partnership has the capacity to influence policy, mobilise investment, strengthen institutions, generate and share knowledge, and accelerate implementation where it matters most. This Strategy is more than a plan for the coming years. It is a shared commitment to collaboration, innovation and collective action, and an invitation for every partner to help shape the next chapter of the Source to Sea Platform.





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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CCS	Cartagena Convention Secretariat
COP	Conference of the Parties
EbA	Ecosystem-based Adaptation
EU	European Union
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
IW:LEARN	International Waters Learning Exchange and Resource Network
IWRM	Integrated Water Resources Management
KM-GBF	Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
LME	Large Marine Ecosystem
NAPs	National Adaptation Plans
NBS	Nature-based Solutions
NBSAPs	National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIWI	Stockholm International Water Institute
S2S	Source-to-sea
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WEFE Nexus	Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems Nexus

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About
the Source-to-Sea Action Platform

Formed in 2014, the Source-to-Sea Action Platform is a multi-stakeholder initiative designed to exchange and generate knowledge, support joint action and embed source-to-sea logic into policy, planning, management, and investment processes that shape outcomes across the land-water-ocean continuum.

Source-to-sea management recognises the linkages from land, to freshwater, to the coasts and the ocean, creating a continuum from the source to the sea. The approach applies a holistic view of the source-to-sea system, with the aim to enhance the integration of benefits and improved management, which will result in greater benefits for the entire system.

The greatest strengths of the Platform continue to be the relevance of the connections between fresh and marine waters, the policy opportunities for source-to-sea dialogues, and the diversity and conviction of the partner network. It has grown into a network of more than 50 committed partners from around the world and across sectors.

Over the years the Platform has successfully influenced policy dialogues as well as operational and financing strategies to better reflect the benefits from source-to-sea action. It has raised awareness and political attention to source-to-sea issues. In the process, it has brought members of the freshwater and ocean communities together and supported policy makers and practitioners through the development and dissemination of knowledge materials, policy briefs and practical tools.

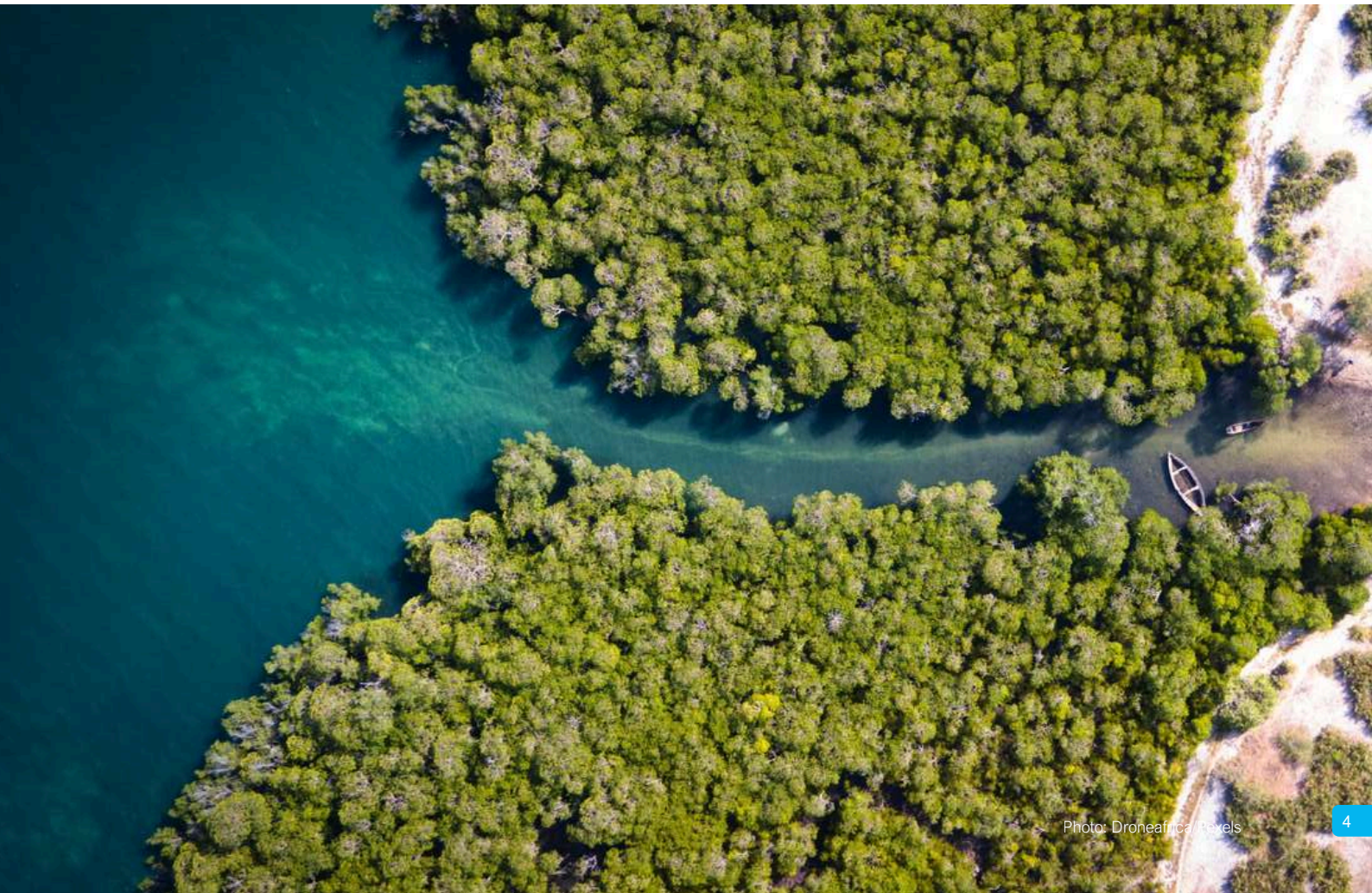


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The need
for a Source-to-sea approach

The relevance of source-to-sea management has intensified as countries confront interlinked crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and water security. Extreme floods and droughts, declining freshwater and marine ecosystems, nutrient and plastic pollution, and increasing competition over land and water are rarely confined to a single sector or jurisdiction. They are systemic challenges that propagate across the land–water–ocean continuum.

However, traditional governance frameworks are often structured around individual segments of a source-to-sea system and/or focused on one sector. This can limit their ability to manage challenges that require more holistic approaches to address the source-to-sea system. Resource management tends to also be dealt with in constrained administrative boundaries resulting in outcomes that may not be optimal for the source-to-sea system.

This fragmentation is compounded by significant gaps in data, knowledge, and capacity, including siloed information systems, limited understanding of economic and political dimensions, uneven stakeholder engagement, and insufficient implementation and monitoring capabilities. At the same time, financing remains both inadequate and misaligned. Financing mechanisms that focus on single sectors result in budgetary constraints which make it difficult to mobilise resources for integrated, system-wide source-to-sea interventions.

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Opportunities
for Source-to-sea Management

Source-to-sea management widens the perspective to include upstream and downstream linkages considering environmental, social and economic interdependencies and stimulating coordination across sectors and geographies. As such, source-to-sea management should be:

- **Holistic:** addressing upstream and downstream linkages across issues, stakeholders, desired outcomes, costs and benefits.
- **Collaborative:** building upon existing institutions, established methods and ongoing processes.
- **Prioritising:** targeting and addressing the issues that hold the greatest potential for generating positive impacts for the system and those that can be taken to scale.
- **Participatory:** engaging upstream and downstream stakeholders from different sectors and raising awareness about the impact of human activities.
- **Context-dependent:** derived from, and responsive to, the local context.
- **Evidence-based:** Decisions and interventions are guided by scientific evidence, drawing on data from the natural and social sciences, monitoring systems, and integrated assessments across the entire source-to-sea continuum.
- **Adaptive:** learning-by-doing through pragmatic implementation, monitoring, evaluation and adaptive management.

Source-to-sea management can play an important role in ensuring that the linkages between the different Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their targets are considered. This is particularly relevant for SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 13: Climate Action; SDG 14: Life Below Water and SDG 15: Life on Land. Other development priorities such as ocean health, ecosystem restoration, biodiversity and poverty alleviation can also be addressed through the cross-sectoral nature of source-to-sea management. It also provides a practical framework for operationalising the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus by promoting integrated planning and management across sectors, recognising the interdependencies and trade-offs that influence resource security, ecosystem health, and sustainable development outcomes. The contribution that source-to-sea management makes to global priorities and sustainable development overall is one of the most compelling reasons for increasing its adoption.

The source-to-sea approach provides a spatial and functional integration framework which brings synergies for the implementation and progress with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), climate change National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). This synergy, under an ecosystem-based approach, has the potential of bringing shared benefits, enhancing effectiveness, and reducing duplication.



Photo: Dmitriy Ryndin/Pexels

Possible entry points for source-to-sea in the NDCs are found in the integration of river basin and coastal ecosystem restoration; application of nature-based solutions; and incorporating the water-energy-food-ecosystems nexus thinking. In addition, source-to-sea strengthens NAPs by elaborating risk assessments considering upstream–downstream dynamics; supporting cross-sectoral adaptation planning; and reducing maladaptation by accounting for system-wide feedback.[1]

The benefits of implementing a source-to-sea approach are multidimensional, positively impacting water, ecosystems, biodiversity, and people. The period 2026–2030 represents a critical window, aligned with the final five years of the 2030 Agenda and the implementation phase of the Global Biodiversity Framework. In this context, the Platform can help address fragmentation by fostering dialogue, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and promoting shared frameworks, while translating knowledge into policy-relevant action. This creates a timely opportunity to renew the Platform's strategy and continue building bridges between freshwater and ocean communities to address the water continuum.

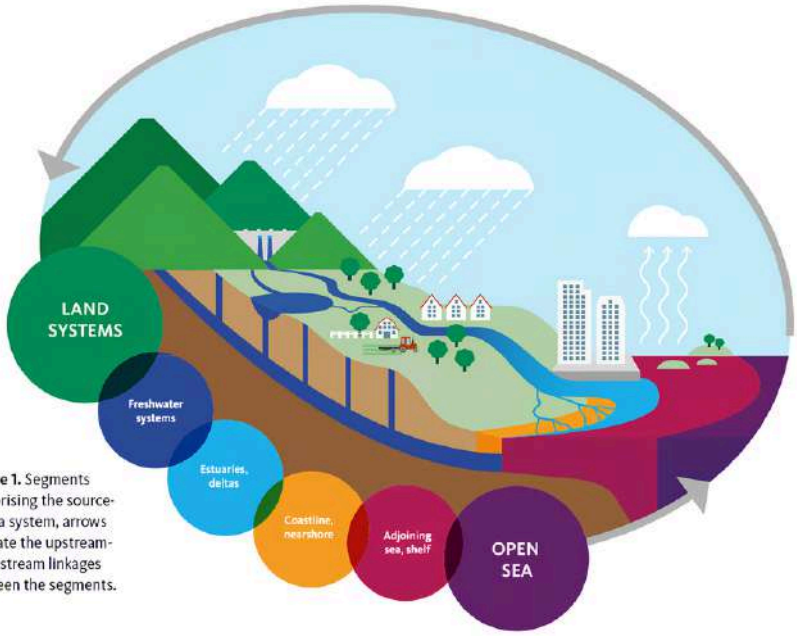


Figure 1. Segments comprising the source-to-sea system, arrows indicate the upstream-downstream linkages between the segments.

1 A recent paper from the Sydney Centre for Sustainable Development Reform, identified that ocean-based climate action plays a vital role in achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement, offering meaningful opportunities for countries to enhance their climate ambition while supporting coastal communities and marine ecosystems. Northrop, E, Burger, B and Belonje, E. Interim Analysis of Ocean Based Climate Actions Communicated in new and updated NDCs and NBSAPs (Sydney, Centre for Sustainable Development Reform, 2025).



Photo: Dmitriy Ryndin/Pexels



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Achievements
and the way forward

The Source-to-Sea Action Platform has been highly successful in placing attention for a source-to-sea approach as part of the global water and marine agendas. Through an active participation, including through hosting events - at global meetings such as the UN Water Conference, UNFCCC COPs, World Water Week, UN Ocean Conference, UN Ocean Decade Conference, and Large Marine Ecosystem (LME) Consultative meetings, the Platform has brought together the water and ocean communities to unite around climate action. It has done so in collaboration with key players including the UN Secretary General Special Envoy for the Ocean and reaching out to the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water.

Further engagement with the UN Water Convention, GEF IW: LEARN, Cap-Net, and the UN Decade of Ocean Science, amongst others, all provided opportunities to incorporate source-to-sea management into global initiatives while expanding demand for practical guidance, capacity development and applied examples. Recent examples of the expanding impact of the Platform are the newly published UNECE Guidance Note for the Implementation of Source-to-Sea Management in Transboundary Basins, and the GEF IW:LEARN Guide on How to Apply the Source-to-Sea Approach in GEF IW Projects.

An active engagement from partners, as well as the interest to the be part of the Steering Committee indicates the broadening interest in the Platform. Partners value the Platform as a neutral space that connects actors across the source-to-sea continuum to share knowledge, strengthen advocacy, influence policy, and co-develop integrated solutions.

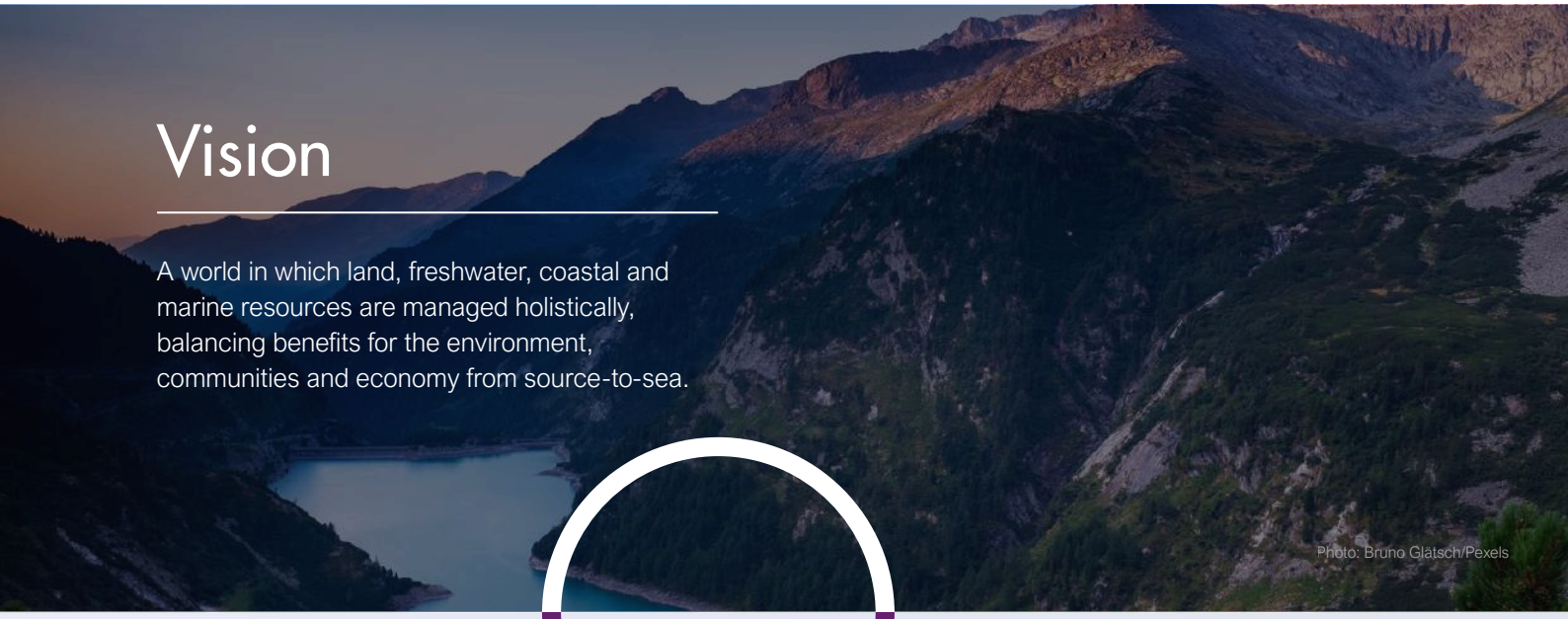
The Platform is positioned to move beyond dialogue towards action, helping to accelerate collective impact as much as strengthening its partners, by facilitating opportunities to embed source-to-sea thinking and approaches into their institutional practice in ways that would be far harder to achieve independently. The Platform provides an impactful collective voice to influence policy and mobilise financing.

Source-to-Sea Action Platform
2026-2030 Strategy

Building on accomplishments from 2021–2025, the Source-to-Sea Action Platform will continue to be a space for partners to exchange on how to best embed source-to-sea logic into real policy, planning, management, and investment processes that shape outcomes across the land-water-ocean continuum. To achieve this, during this next strategic phase (2026-2030), the Platform will work along several strategic lines.

The strategy will be implemented and operationalised as a scalable model, whereas different goals may be pursued at a distinctive pace, guided by partners' priorities, level of ambition, and emerging investment or collaboration opportunities.

The Platform is an open, collaborative space where partners can engage at different levels, from co-designing initiatives to increasing visibility, mobilising resources, and building connections. It provides practical entry points for partners to act on their interests and, in some cases, has helped organisations further shape their own source-to-sea narratives and approaches.



Vision

A world in which land, freshwater, coastal and marine resources are managed holistically, balancing benefits for the environment, communities and economy from source-to-sea.

Photo: Bruno Glätsch/Pexels

Mission

Enable sustainable development across the land-freshwater-marine continuum through supporting the adoption and implementation of source-to-sea management at regional, national, and sub-national levels.

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Strategic Goal 1

Source-to-sea management is systemically embedded in policy, planning, management and investment, enabling coordinated action across freshwater, land, and ocean systems and delivering measurable ecosystem improvements.

Fragmented governance and entrenched sectoral silos remain the primary structural constraint. Land, freshwater, coastal, and marine systems continue to be managed through disconnected mandates, legal frameworks and institutions, resulting in misaligned decisions and weak coordination across scales and boundaries. Addressing this fragmentation is a central priority for accelerating impact.

While source-to-sea has successfully established recognition and strengthened linkages between land, freshwater, and ocean communities, the next phase requires moving beyond awareness to institutionalisation and implementation. This includes deepening cross-sector integration, expanding political and financial commitment, and embedding source-to-sea approaches within decision-making processes that drive tangible results.

Scaling source-to-sea will leverage established governance and delivery frameworks, including Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus, Nature-based Solutions (NbS), and Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA), to accelerate implementation through existing policy, planning, and investment processes.



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Strategic Goal 1.1

Source-to-sea is integrated into global, regional, and national policy frameworks and commitments, strengthening coherence across freshwater, coastal, and ocean governance systems and embedding source-to-sea principles into planning and decision-making processes.

Specific objectives:

- Coherent source-to-sea principles and priorities are reflected across global, regional, and national and transboundary policy and governance frameworks, improving alignment between freshwater, coastal, and ocean management systems.
- Source-to-sea approaches are embedded in international commitments, national strategies, and sectoral plans, including those related to land, water, climate, biodiversity, pollution, and sustainable development. Whenever possible, implementation will be through established governance and delivery frameworks such as IWRM, the WEFE Nexus, NbS, EbA, SDGs progress plans, Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, recognising source-to-sea approaches as a bridging mechanism across multilateral environmental agreements.
- Institutions and stakeholders apply source-to-sea approaches in planning and decision-making processes, supported by strengthened coordination mechanisms, cross-sector collaboration, and governance frameworks.

Metrics of success:

- ☑ Number of global, regional, and national policy frameworks, strategies, or action plans that explicitly incorporate source-to-sea approaches or principles.
- ☑ Number of international commitments or reporting processes (e.g. SDGs, NDCs/NAPs, NBSAPs, regional seas frameworks) that integrate source-to-sea considerations.
- ☑ Number of countries or regional bodies establishing or strengthening cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms linking freshwater, coastal, and ocean governance.
- ☑ Evidence of source-to-sea approaches being applied in planning and decision-making processes, such as integrated basin–coastal management plans, marine spatial plans, or watershed investment strategies.
- ☑ Level of stakeholder engagement and institutional collaboration across sectors and scales, measured through participation, joint initiatives, or formal partnerships supporting integrated source-to-sea governance.



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Photo: Stijn Dijkstra/Pexels

Strategic Goal 1.2

Source-to-sea approaches are integrated into financing and investment frameworks, unlocking public and private investment and enabling the large-scale implementation of integrated actions across land, freshwater, coastal, and ocean systems.

Specific objectives:

- Finance institutions apply tools, evidence, and screening approaches that integrate source-to-sea interdependencies and translate source-to-sea benefits into investment criteria and decisions, driving financing of integrated solutions for the public good.
- Multilateral, public, private, and philanthropic financing systems, including climate and blue economy mechanisms, as well as agrifood system investments, amongst others, integrate source-to-sea criteria, unlocking blended finance and scaling investment in integrated freshwater–ocean solutions that demonstrate the return on investment of integrated source-to-sea solutions.
- Finance institutions along with multilateral, public, private and philanthropic financing systems and/or financial regulators develop and adopt screening criteria that prevent investments from going forward that fail to adopt a source-to-sea approach or require a revised investment that integrates source-to-sea.

Metrics of success:

- ☑ Inclusion of source-to-sea interdependencies and criteria in funding mechanisms.
- ☑ Engagement of development banks, donors, or climate funds in discussions on applying source-to-sea approaches.
- ☑ Unlocking blended finance and scaling investment in integrated freshwater–ocean solutions.
- ☑ Investment frameworks are developed based on a source-to-sea approach, with eligibility restricted to projects that demonstrate compliance with this approach.
- ☑ Investments and projects revised and redesigned to ensure they integrate a source-to-sea approach.

Strategic Goal 2

Platform partners collaborate through coordinated source-to-sea implementation, using the Platform to align opportunities, advance partner priorities, and deliver measurable impact across the land–freshwater–coastal–ocean continuum.

Efforts will be strategically focused on contexts with high potential for near-term impact, such as transboundary basins with strong institutions, clear land–sea linkages, and highly impacted, smaller watersheds while placing less emphasis on fragmented systems, weak institutional settings, and areas with limited partner engagement or financing prospects. A clear set of criteria will guide this prioritisation, integrating geographic, ecological, institutional, financing, and partnership considerations.

Suggested criteria (to be further developed):

- Defined geography or source-to-sea system
- Clearly identified implementation problem
- Alignment with existing regional and national processes
- Committed coalition of partners
- Live policy or investment entry point
- Measurable output within 24 months

The Platform will not replicate existing IWRM or watershed processes. Instead, it will target specific interventions where source-to-sea approaches add distinct value by strengthening integration, coordination, and joint action across interconnected systems. In addition, the Platform will seek alignment with existing regional and national processes.

The Platform's comparative advantage lies in its convening power, technical expertise and partner network dedicated to advancing integrated source-to-sea.

From concept to implementation, the Platform enables partners to translate strategy into action on the ground, responding to country priorities while scaling proven approaches and demonstrating impact.



Photo: Justinreznick/Getty Images Signature

Strategic Goal 2.1

Collaborative project development and implementation by partners drive collective impact and shared ownership of results.

Specific objectives:

- Structured collaboration mechanisms generate a pipeline of jointly developed source-to-sea projects and funding proposals.
- Partners' regional expertise and presence are mobilised to advance locally driven priorities and enable effective cross-border collaboration.
- Strengthen and diversify the Platform to ensure balanced, cross-sectoral representation and engagement, including broadening the partners from the coastal and ocean communities.

Metrics of success:

- ☑ Growth in the number of Platform partners actively engaged in source-to-sea projects.
- ☑ Proportion of Platform partners representing different sectors (public, private, academia, civil society).
- ☑ Proportion of Platform partners representing diverse thematic areas (freshwater, ocean, agriculture, energy, industry).
- ☑ Number of joint funding proposals submitted in the framework of the Platform umbrella.
- ☑ Number of funded projects that move into implementation phase.
- ☑ Plug-into ongoing projects (e.g. GEF, EU Ocean Pact, EU Marine Strategy, SDGs, NDCs/NAPs, NBSAPs)
- ☑ Pilot or demonstration initiatives emerging from regional collaboration.
- ☑ Replication or adaptation of pilot models scaled up in existing or in new basins or regions.



Photo: edb3_16/Getty Images

Strategic Goal 2.2

Partners actively engage in and contribute to the Source-to-Sea Action Platform, resulting in strengthened collaboration, increased visibility, and shared ownership of the source-to-sea approach and its implementation.

Specific objectives:

- Partners actively and consistently represent the Platform at major national, regional, and global freshwater and ocean events, strengthening its visibility and collective positioning.
- Partners are consistently connected through regular exchanges, including, but not limited to the "Partners in the Round Call", resulting in stronger collaboration and sustained momentum on source-to-sea action..
- Structured working groups and communities of practice deliver coordinated activities and concrete outputs, such as events, research, joint projects, and policy dialogues- aligned with partners' priorities.

Metrics of success:

- ☑ Increased representation of the Platform at events through its partners.
- ☑ High-value interventions (e.g., keynote speeches, panel leadership, speaking roles, side events).
- ☑ Frequency and participation rates in "Partners in the Round calls".
- ☑ Participation in thematic working groups and/or communities of practice.

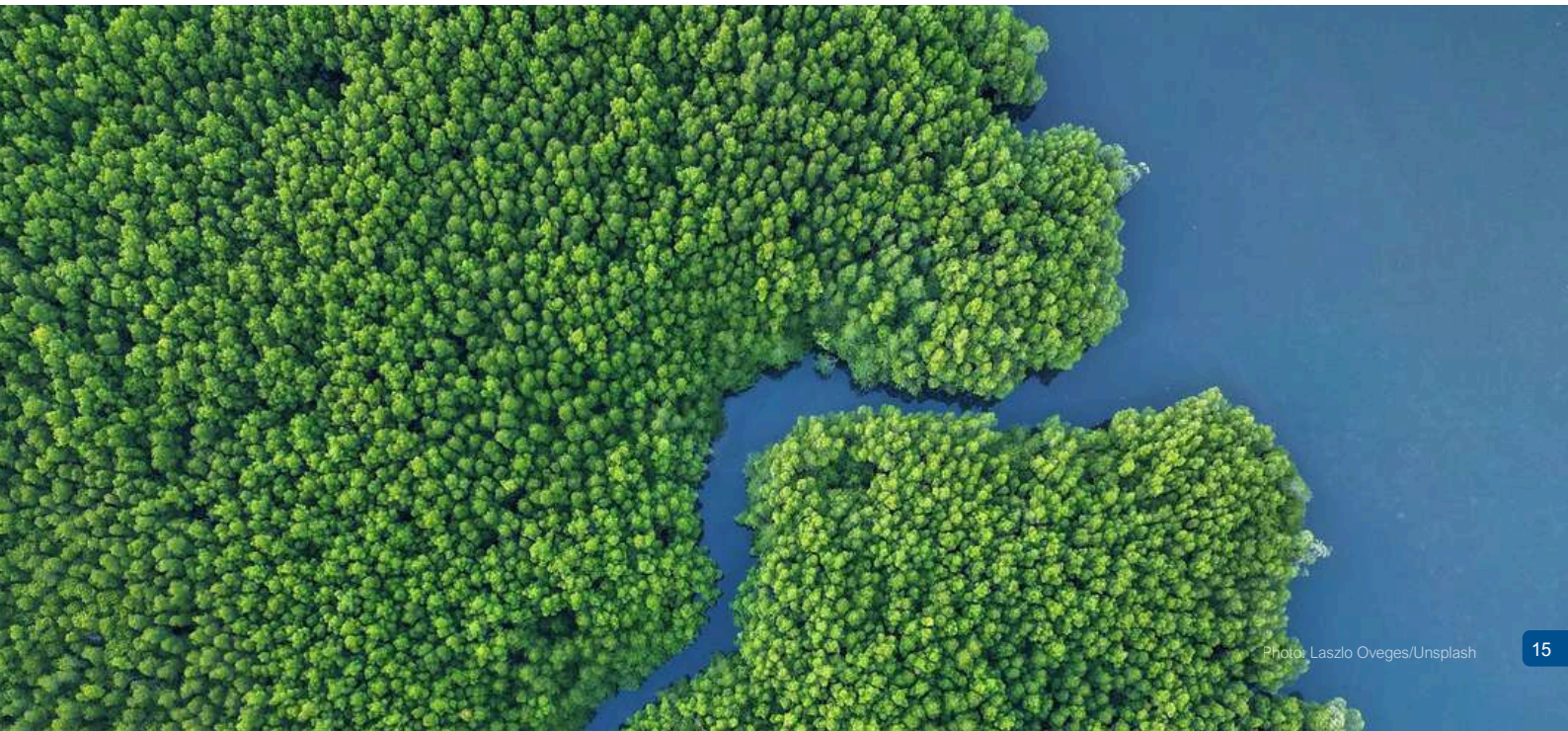


Photo: Laszlo Oveges/Unsplash

Strategic Goal 3

Practitioners and institutions strengthen their capacity, data access, and knowledge base to support the effective implementation of source-to-sea approaches and to drive stronger evidence-based influence on policy and financing.

The Platform will focus on closing three critical gaps:

1. **Institutional:** fragmented mandates, weak cross-sector coordination, and limited capacity to operate across scales;
2. **Technical:** insufficient and disconnected data, and gaps in understanding land–freshwater–coastal interactions;
3. **Leadership:** limited individual champions and inconsistent political commitment.

While these challenges cut across all strategic goals, this goal focuses specifically on strengthening the enabling conditions—capacities, data systems, and learning frameworks—needed to address them in practice. To address these, the Platform will strengthen coordination, build targeted capacity, and support the development and mobilisation of leadership across levels.

A core priority is improving the integration and usability of data across the source-to-sea continuum. Currently, data is generated in silos across sectors and disciplines, limiting its value for broader decision-making. The Platform will support more coordinated data generation, integration, and monitoring to enable actionable, science-based decisions and demonstrate impact.



Photo: Regina Meyes/Getty Images

Strategic Goal 3.1

Partners apply enhanced skills and capacities to effectively implement integrated source-to-sea approaches across freshwater, land, coastal, and marine systems.

Specific objectives:

- Partners integrate and further develop source-to-sea approaches into their policies, programmes, and projects, enabling coordinated action across sectors and systems.
- Improved partner capacities result in higher-quality, more effective, and scalable source-to-sea implementation.
- Partners are part of learning processes and apply best practices to continuously improve the design and implementation of source-to-sea initiatives. This could include thematic practice groups among the Platform partners.

Metrics of success:

- ☑ Development and dissemination of knowledge and learning resources.
- ☑ Online and blended training.
- ☑ Contribution to scientific knowledge: research, technical papers, case studies, sector reports.
- ☑ Adaptation of source-to-sea tools and methodologies to regional contexts.
- ☑ Regional lessons and case studies documented and shared at global level.
- ☑ Document and promote scalable models emerging from pilots.
- ☑ Working groups and communities of practice established among Partners on salient thematic and geographic topics.

This component primarily responds to institutional and leadership gaps, by strengthening partner capacity, coordination, and the ability to apply source-to-sea approaches in practice.



Photo: Constantino Filmes/Pexels

Strategic Goal 3.2

Initiate the inception phase of a source-to-sea data portal by identifying and testing core structural requirements, including priority data and information needs, sources of evidence and the applicability of data for policy, planning, and investment decision-making across the source-to-sea continuum.

Progressing in the implementation of the source-to-sea approach requires data-driven decision-making, not a standard content database or repository. Built through a phased approach, the data portal should provide the foundation to identify thematic priorities, policy support tools, risk and scenario analysis, and investment-oriented applications

The data portal should align with and support existing national commitments (e.g., SDGs, NDCs/NAPs, NBSAPs) by embedding source-to-sea logic into their implementation through integrated indicators and guidance. The data portal will be positioned as decision-support, with a focus on shared monitoring frameworks to help improve consistency and uptake in policy and investment processes. Functionally, the portal should combine data visualisation, scenario analysis, and case-based evidence to support planning and investment decisions.

Specific objectives:

Phase 1: Scoping and validation (foundational work)

- Priority data needs, evidence gaps, and user requirements for a source-to-sea data portal are identified and validated to support future policy, planning, and investment applications across the source-to-sea continuum.
- A preliminary set of source-to-sea indicators, guidance elements, and monitoring needs is developed and tested to explore alignment with national and global commitments (e.g., SDGs, NDCs/NAPs, NBSAPs)

Phase 2: Design and pilot development (building the system)

- Initial methodologies and case-based approaches for integrating data, scenario analysis, and evidence into source-to-sea decision-making are identified and tested, laying the groundwork for future scaling and implementation support.
- Options for standardised metrics and monitoring approaches are explored and piloted to support future tracking, comparison, and learning across source-to-sea systems

Phase 3: Application and integration (policy and finance uptake)

- Source-to-sea indicators and guidance are integrated into the implementation and monitoring of national commitments (e.g., SDGs, NDCs/NAPs, NBSAPs).
- Potential applications of source-to-sea data for risk assessment, benefit valuation, and investment planning are assessed with financial and planning actors, informing the continued development of the source-to-sea data portal.

This component addresses technical gaps, focusing on improving the availability, integration, and usability of data for decision-making.

Metrics of success:

- ☑ Number of priority source-to-sea datasets, indicators, and information needs identified and validated.
- ☑ Completion of technical scoping studies and roadmaps for portal development.
- ☑ Number of pilot cases testing source-to-sea indicators and monitoring approaches.
- ☑ Level of partner commitment to support the next phase of portal development.



Photo: RussieseO/Getty Images

Strategic Goal 3.3

Consistent application of shared monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks drives measurable results and continuous improvement across source-to-sea initiatives.

Equipping partners with practical monitoring, evaluation, and learning tools by promoting shared indicators, guidance, and methodologies that allow partners to track, compare, and communicate the environmental, social, and climate impacts of source-to-sea initiatives and progress of the 2026-2030 Strategy.

Specific objectives:

- Partners consistently apply shared monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks across source-to-sea initiatives.
- Standardized indicators and methodologies enable partners to track, compare, and demonstrate environmental, social, and climate impacts.
- Partners effectively communicate results and use evidence to inform decision-making, policy, and investment.
- Monitoring and evaluation results are systematically used to drive continuous learning and improve the design and implementation of source-to-sea initiatives.

This component contributes across all three gaps by enabling evidence-based learning, accountability, and adaptive management, strengthening both institutional performance and leadership for results.

Metrics of success:

- Development of monitoring frameworks: creation of shared monitoring, evaluation, and learning guidance, indicators, and methodologies for source-to-sea initiatives.
- Capacity for impact monitoring: participation of partners in trainings or technical exchanges related to monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment.
- Data generation and reporting: number of initiatives reporting results using the shared monitoring framework or indicators.
- Comparability of results: availability of comparable data across multiple source-to-sea initiatives or regions.



Photo: RussieseO/Getty Images

Means of Implementation:
A Strategy Serving Partners' Interests

1

OPERATIONALISING THE PLATFORM THROUGH A NETWORKED SECRETARIAT AND DISTINCTIVE PARTNER ROLES

A dedicated coordination unit, which is currently played by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as the host, is necessary to facilitate coordination, ensure continuity, and enable meaningful participation across the Source-to-Sea Action Platform. At the same time, the Platform seeks to remain lean, cost-effective, and partner driven. For this reason, this strategy outlines how the secretariat can operate through a network model, in which a small central coordinating unit works in partnership with distributed functional "cells" hosted or led by partners.

This model allows the Platform to leverage the expertise, networks, and capacities of its partners, while maintaining a clear structure for coordination and accountability.

The implementation of the 2026–2030 Strategy will be supported by a Roadmap to be launched alongside the Strategy. The Roadmap will translate the strategic goals into a phased implementation plan, identifying priority actions and key milestones to guide progress during the five-year period.

During the first year of the Strategy, the operational model of the Platform will be further developed through the preparation of detailed terms of reference (ToR) and operating arrangements for the Platform Coordination function and the distributed implementation cells. As part of this process, at least two distributed cells will be established as pilot experiences to test and refine the Platform's implementation module, generating practical lessons that will inform its progressive scaling and operationalisation across the partnership.



Photo: Fernando Alonso/Getty Images

Secretariat Structure:
Coordination Unit and Distributed Cells

The Platform operates through a small central coordination unit and a network of partner-led cells. This coordination unit, hosted by IUCN, provides the institutional anchor of the Platform. It ensures continuity, coherence, and overall coordination.

The coordination unit is responsible for:

- Safeguarding institutional memory and knowledge
- Representing the Platform externally (partnerships, agreements, contracts)
- Supporting governance processes, including the Steering Committee
- Coordinating key documents (reports, strategies, proposals)
- Maintaining core digital tools (website, knowledge hub)
- Ensuring alignment and communication across all cells
- Monitoring overall strategy implementation

Distributed Cells

The secretariat is complemented by distributed cells, led by partners with relevant expertise. Each cell focuses on a specific area of work and helps implement the Platform's strategy.

This approach allows the Platform to:

- Draw on partner expertise
- Promote shared ownership and leadership
- Expand capacity without growing a central structure

Cells work in coordination with the coordination unit to ensure alignment and consistency.

Coordination

The coordination unit provides overall direction; cells lead on delivery.
To keep the system simple and effective:

- Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
- Regular exchanges take place between the coordination unit and cells
- Planning and reporting follow a shared framework
- Information is openly shared across the Platform



Photo: Mark Fox/Alamy



Photo: Mark Fox/Alamy

Examples of Cells

- Knowledge partners: methods, evidence, tools, case studies.
- Implementation partners: priority geographies, pilots, integration into programmes.
- Policy partners: agendas, processes, government links, advocacy windows.
- Finance partners: funding pipelines, investment design, screening, co-finance.

How the Model Works

- Cells are voluntary and demand-driven
- Not all cells start at once; they develop over time
- Partners lead the cells based on interest and capacity
- Each cell has a clear scope and light structure
- Work is guided by simple plans and regular updates
- Roles rotate every ~3 years to ensure continuity and ownership

Standing *for* partners, and implementing with partners, the strategy recognises the value of the partnership for the functioning of the Platform. This model keeps coordination light and flexible, while enabling partners to take the lead. It allows the Platform to grow and deliver impact without building a large central secretariat.

2 A STRONG STEERING COMMITTEE BACKING THE STRATEGY

The Source-to-Sea Action Platform has a strong and active Steering Committee, with clearly defined and agreed terms of reference and roles to provide oversight of the Platform. The membership of this Steering Committee is up for election every three years. It is the aim of the Steering Committee to ensure balanced partner representation across partner typology and sectoral experience. Steering Committee members are institutional representatives (with named individuals).

3 PARTNER ROLES AND COMMITMENTS

The Source-to-Sea Action Platform is designed as a collaborative mechanism that creates opportunities for partners to contribute according to their mandates, expertise, and strategic priorities. Participation remains voluntary and is expected to vary over time, reflecting partners' evolving programmes, resources, and institutional priorities. This flexibility is a strength of the Platform, allowing partners to engage where they can add the greatest value while maintaining an open and inclusive partnership.

At the same time, the successful implementation of this Strategy requires a higher level of commitment from a number of partners that choose to take on leadership roles within the Platform. Partners leading distributed cells are expected to contribute to the delivery of agreed work plans under jointly developed terms of reference, which will define the scope of work, responsibilities, governance arrangements, expected duration of the role, and reporting mechanisms. These arrangements will be agreed between the Platform host and the lead partner for each cell. Similarly, membership of the Steering Committee carries an expectation of active engagement, recognising its responsibility for providing strategic guidance, oversight, and accountability for the implementation of the Strategy.



Photo: JESHOOTS/Pexels

4 FUNDING THE STRATEGY: A DIVERSIFIED MODEL

In the absence of a dedicated funded programme, the strategy will be implemented through a flexible, phased approach, allowing different strategic goals to progress at varying speeds based on partner interest, leadership, capacity, and emerging opportunities. This approach aligns with a diversified funding model that combines multiple sources and levels of support over time, enabling the Platform to initiate action and scale progressively rather than relying on a single large funding commitment.

While a comprehensive multi-year, donor-funded programme could support full-scale implementation, this would require substantial upfront investment, significant design and negotiation efforts, and would face low probability of success given current constraints in global development financing. Declining and uncertain Official Development Assistance (ODA), coupled with shifting donor priorities, reinforce the need for a more adaptive and opportunity-driven approach rather than reliance on a single funding pathway.

The recommended model combines targeted project funding, partner-driven contributions, and a "plug-in" approach into existing initiatives. The Platform will support partners in advancing specific source-to-sea outcomes—ranging from discrete activities to larger programmes—while contributing expertise, coordination, and tools to ongoing projects across scales. By embedding within existing efforts rather than creating parallel structures, the Platform maximises impact, generates tangible results, and strengthens integration across the land–freshwater–coastal–ocean continuum.

5 FUNDRAISING ROLES, OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR FUNDING AND LEGAL MANAGEMENT, AND IN-KIND CONTRIBUTIONS

A dedicated working group should be established to lead fundraising, resource mobilisation, and define the operational framework of the approach. This includes setting clear guidelines on legal contracting, overhead collection and allocation, and the use of the Platform name, logo, and representation. This function could sit as a specialised subgroup within the Steering Committee, complemented by additional targeted expertise.

The proposed funding model is intentionally diversified, relying significantly on in-kind partner contributions—particularly staff time—and on maximising existing resources and initiatives. This will be reflected in distributed roles, including a network secretariat model rather than a centralised structure.

Importantly, the strategy is designed to enable partners to advance their own priorities, mandates, and programmes within a shared framework of opportunities. It does not aim to centralise operations or assume responsibility for funding and managing core platform functions.



Photo: Jag_cz/Getty Images

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Interviews

- **Torkil Clausen:** Former Chair of the Source-to-Sea Action Platform.
- **Ruth Mathews**: Former manager of the Source-to-Sea Action Platform at Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI).
- **José Murillo:** Former member of the Source-to-Sea Action Platform secretariat at SIWI.
- **Christopher Corbin:** Coordinator, Cartagena Convention Secretariat (CCS), Ecosystems Division, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).
- **Maria Lindelien:** Senior Water Governance Officer, Water and Wetlands Team, IUCN
- **James Dalton:** Water Global Director, IUCN
- **Tom Panella:** Chair of the Steering Committee – Source-to-Sea Action Platform (IUCN)

Note on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The preparation of this strategy was primarily informed by stakeholder interviews, reviews of existing source-to-sea reports and documentation, and discussions held with members of the Source-to-Sea Action Platform Steering Committee and IUCN as the current host. These inputs constituted the substantive basis for the analysis, strategic direction, and recommendations presented in the document.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a complementary manner to support the drafting and refinement process. Specifically, OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.5 model) and Microsoft Copilot were used to help review grammar, copy-editing, improve clarity and structure, strengthen consistency in terminology and presentation. AI-generated suggestions were continuously reviewed, validated, and adapted in dialogue with the findings and perspectives gathered from partners and stakeholders.

The use of AI did not replace expert judgment, stakeholder input, or strategic decision-making, but rather served as an editorial tool during the development of the strategy.

About IUCN

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a membership Union uniquely composed of both government and civil society organisations. It provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation to take place together.

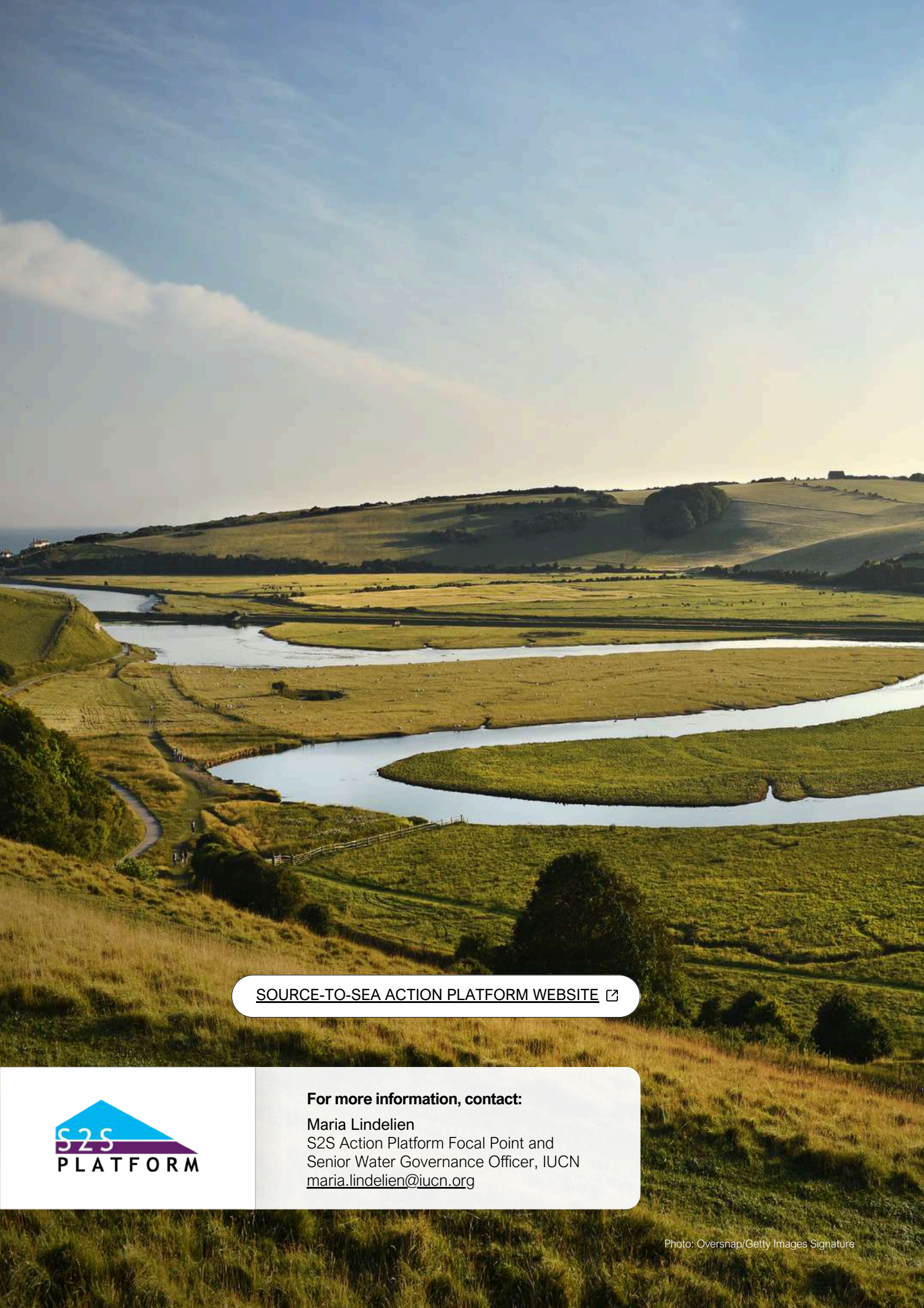
Created in 1948, IUCN is now the world's largest and most diverse environmental network, harnessing the knowledge, resources and reach of more than 1,600 Member organisations and around 19,000 experts. It is a leading provider of conservation data, assessments and analysis. Its broad membership enables IUCN to fill the role of incubator and trusted repository of best practices, tools and international standards.

IUCN provides a neutral space in which diverse stakeholders including governments, NGOs, scientists, businesses, local communities, indigenous peoples organisations and others can work together to forge and implement solutions to environmental challenges and achieve sustainable development.

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IUCN has been the host of the Source-to-Sea Action Platform since January 2025.

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SOURCE-TO-SEA ACTION PLATFORM WEBSITE

S2S PLATFORM

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