Topic B: Protection of marine ecosystems and coastal areas from unsustainable tourism

United Nations Environmental Program

UAQMUN
2027
Voices of a new era: youth facing global challenges

Introduction to the committee

We are pleased to welcome you to this edition of the Model United Nations of Universidad Anáhuac Querétaro (UAQMUN 2027). The School of International Relations and the organizing team sincerely thank you for your participation, and we wish you a formative, challenging, and enriching experience within this model.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the leading global authority on the environment, dedicated to tackling the triple planetary crisis: the crisis of climate change, the crisis of nature, land and biodiversity loss, and the crisis of pollution and waste. Since its founding in 1972, UNEP has served as a neutral convener of Member States, civil society, the private sector and UN agencies to address humanity's most pressing environmental challenges. Today, UNEP hosts the United Nations Environment Assembly, the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, with a universal membership of all 193 United Nations Member States. Through robust science, global coordination, and powerful advocacy,y and guided by its mission to inform, enable, and inspire, UNEP supports nations worldwide in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and improving their quality of life while safeguarding the environment for future generations.

On this occasion, the committee will focus on the following debate:

"Protection of marine ecosystems and coastal areas from unsustainable tourism"

Coastal and marine ecosystems, like coral reefs and mangroves, support over 3 billion people and drive a $2.5 trillion ocean economy. Coastal tourism drives this "Blue Economy," yet unmanaged mass tourism causes severe damage, including habitat destruction, pollution, and freshwater depletion. Socially, it raises living costs and displaces local communities.

Historically treated as an economic priority, coastal tourism expanded exponentially after the 1990s through cheap flights, cruise ships, and resorts, overwhelming early conservation efforts. Today, the debate pits immediate economic survival against long-term ecological health:

- **Economic Dependence vs. Environmental Limits:** Small Island Developing States (SIDS) rely on tourism for 40–70% of GDP, making visitor caps or construction freezes risky.
- **Corporate Interests vs. Local Impact:** Cruise lines and resort conglomerates push for low regulation, despite generating massive waste relative to local contributions.
- **Binding Regulation vs. Voluntary Commitments:** Environmentalists demand legally binding Marine Spatial Planning (visitor caps, no-go zones), while businesses favor voluntary certifications.
- **Climate Equity:** Developing nations argue that high-income countries must provide green funding and low-interest loans to build sustainable coastal infrastructure.

Progress remains stalled because national ministries (tourism, shipping, environment) rarely coordinate. The committee's objective is for delegates to cooperate and draft practical, balanced solutions: enforcing visitor limits, securing green financing, supporting local communities, and protecting shared waters without destroying coastal economies.

Topic “B”: Protection of marine ecosystems and coastal areas from unsustainable tourism

Marine ecosystems are aquatic environments with high levels of dissolved salt; these include the open ocean, the deep-sea ocean, and coastal marine ecosystems, each of which has different physical and biological characteristics. Marine ecosystems are defined by their unique biotic (living) and abiotic (nonliving) factors. Biotic factors include plants, animals, and microbes; important abiotic factors include the amount of sunlight in the ecosystem, the amount of oxygen and nutrients dissolved in the water, proximity to land, depth, and temperature (National Geographic Society, 2025).

Coastal areas are the interface between the land and water. They are important settlements and play a vital role in the wealth of many nations. Nearly 25% of the world’s population lives within 100km of a shoreline. Many of the world’s largest countries are located at the coast, such as Tokyo, London, New York, etcetera., and, of course, so are critical infrastructures such as energy facilities, ports, and airports. Coasts are also home to important and productive ecosystems that are increasingly valued by society (Zanuttigh et al., 2015).

Marine and coastal ecosystems are pivotal to global biodiversity, supporting billions by providing food, coastal protection against climate disasters, economic opportunities, and jobs; they sustain over 3 billion people. Globally, the ocean economy is valued at an estimated $2.5 trillion. Marine and coastal tourism represents one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global “Blue Economy,y” which is the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic development, accounting for a major share of international travel revenue. However, when unmanaged or unregulated, tourism creates severe ecological pressures (UNEP, 2017).

Sustainable ocean economies are essential for addressing global challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, and climate change. By promoting a Blue Economy, countries are able to access the economic potential of oceans while ensuring that marine ecosystems are protected and restored. Without a sustainable approach, overexploitation and pollution could threaten the very ecosystems that support fisheries, tourism, and coastal industries (UNEP, 2017).

Unsustainable tourism manifests through direct physical damage, overconsumption of fresh water, untreated sewage discharges, marine littering, and ecosystem fragmentation. Coastal mass tourism frequently drives social displacement, inflates local cost-of-living, and alienates Indigenous and local communities from their traditional coastal access. Addressing unsustainable tourism requires shifting from high-volume, extractive models to regenerative tourism that operates within strict, ecosystem-based management boundaries (UNEP, 2020).

History of the topic

Marine and coastal pollution from tourism began as a recognized localized issue in the mid-19th century with the birth of industrial coastal resorts, but it transformed into a severe global crisis during the 1950s and 1960s due to the arrival of mass tourism. It is still an ongoing issue (Davenport & Davenport, 2006).

Historically, coastal tourism was managed primarily as a national economic development priority with minimal environmental oversight. Early international policy efforts focused on broader ocean conservation rather than targeting tourism specifically:

1. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971): Established early protections for coastal wetlands and mangroves, limiting infrastructure encroachments (UNESCO, 2026).
2. UNEP Regional Seas Programme (1974): Created regional frameworks to address land-based sources of marine pollution and coastal degradation (UNEP, 2017).
3. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022) established the “30x30” goal, which consists of conserving at least 30% of global land and water by 2030, creating legally protected zones that directly restrict intrusive tourist activities (Zhang et al., 2025).

Despite these treaties, the exponential post-1990 rise of low-cost aviation, cruise ship mega-vessels, and unregulated coastal resorts outpaced local regulatory capacity. Mass tourism has turned localized ecological stress into a widespread global crisis. In response, international bodies introduced frameworks such as the UNEP Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria, urging governments and private investors to shift from volume-driven growth to sustainable spatial planning (UNEP, 2018).

Discussion of the topic

Developing coastal states, particularly small island developing states, often rely on tourism for over 40-70% of their national Gross Domestic Product, the total monetary value of all final goods and services produced within a country's borders during a specific period, and employment. For these nations, the imposition of strict visitor caps, high eco-taxes, or postponements of hotel construction sites poses an immediate risk to public revenue and livelihoods, even when the underlying ecosystems are degrading (UNEP, 2020).

International cruise lines and resort conglomerates frequently leverage their major financial footprint to demand minimal environmental restrictions and low port fees. Despite this, some people argue that cruise ships tend to generate disproportionate volumes of bilge water, microplastics, and carbon emissions while contributing little to local land-based economies. Therefore, the damage is far more impactful than the “benefits”.

Environmental advocates and vulnerable local communities demand legally binding Marine Spatial Planning; this means creating mandatory international laws and agreements that countries must follow to govern marine activities, protect ecosystems, and manage shared resources. This would include visitor limits and zones where tourism is completely banned. Environmental advocates argue that travel companies should be held accountable for their environmental impact and subject to tough rules. Conversely, tourism businesses are aiming for optional eco-friendly certifications, self-policing, and teaming up with governments instead of strict legal bans (UNEP, 2017).

Coral bleaching and coastal erosion caused by climate change are exacerbated by local tourism pressures. Developing nations argue that high-income, tourism-originating countries should provide low-interest loans and financial aid. This funding would help developing nations build eco-friendly infrastructure and protect their environment (UNEP, 2026).

UNEP continues to help neighbouring countries create joint plans for their shared waters, always balancing coastal business with environmental protection. However, real-world progress stalls because government branches (tourism, shipping, and environment ministries) rarely work together or enforce the rules uniformly (UNEP, 2017).

The main goal of this committee is for delegates to put aside national conflicts, work together, and build real solutions. Member states are challenged to cooperate and draft practical guidelines and solutions that set strict tourist limits, secure green funding, which is any financial investment, loan, or funding mechanism used to support environmentally friendly projects and sustainable development, support local communities, and protect shared waters, provided that nations can safeguard fragile marine ecosystems while still maintaining stable, thriving economies.

Guiding Questions

1. How does your nation balance its economic reliance on coastal tourism with the urgent need to protect marine ecosystems?
2. What national regulatory frameworks (Marine Spatial Planning, coastal zoning) does your country use to limit resort development and coastal damage?
3. Should the international community establish legally binding visitor limits for fragile coastal destinations, or should these decisions remain strictly national?
4. How can international regulations effectively hold cruise ship conglomerates accountable for waste disposal, microplastics, and carbon emissions in foreign waters?
5. What mechanisms can ensure that green tourism revenues (such as eco-taxes or entry fees) are directly reinvested into local marine conservation and community development?
6. How can governance frameworks protect Indigenous and local coastal communities from social displacement and loss of traditional shoreline access caused by mass tourism?
7. What financial mechanisms should high-income, tourist-originating nations provide to help developing states build sustainable coastal infrastructure?
8. How can government ministries (such as Tourism, Environment, and Transport) improve cross-sectoral coordination to enforce coastal protections effectively?
9. Should global eco-friendly certifications for tourism operators remain voluntary, or should UNEP advocate for mandatory international standards?
10. How can nature-based solutions (coral reef and mangrove restoration) be integrated into national tourism budgets?
11. What policies can prevent coastal resorts from overconsuming local freshwater resources and discharging untreated sewage into marine environments?
12. How can regional treaties (like the UNEP Regional Seas Action Plans) resolve transboundary marine pollution caused by shared tourist basins?
13. In what ways can tourism-dependent nations diversify their economies to reduce over-reliance on high-volume mass tourism?
14. How can Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for new coastal infrastructure be standardized to prevent habitat fragmentation before construction begins?

List of participants

- United States of America
- People's Republic of China
- Republic of Indonesia
- United Mexican States
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- Federal Republic of Germany
- Republic of Maldives
- Kingdom of Norway
- Republic of Rwanda
- Republic of Kenya
- Republic of India
- Federative Republic of Brazil
- Kingdom of Thailand
- Republic of South Africa
- Arab Republic of Egypt
- State of Japan
- Republic of Colombia
- Hellenic Republic
- Tuvalu
- United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

References

Davenport, J., & Davenport, J. L. (2006). The impact of tourism and personal leisure transport on coastal environments: A review. *Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science*, *67*(1), 280-292. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecss.2005.11.026

National Geographic Society. (2025). *Marine Ecosystems*. https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/marine-ecosystems

RAMSAR. (2026). *Home page | The Convention on Wetlands*. (s. f.). https://www.ramsar.org/?__cf_chl_tk=bx.8RCAjUCpTLD4I3WX0idmUITzy_uHjbZoZmOY6JJE-1787611935-1.0.1.1-8zsjNl4vPkd1TXZWuu__5X1Zqs0UgPMXHCrkflk7rPI

UNEP. (s. f.). *About the United Nations Environment Programme | UNEP - UN Environment Programme*. https://www.unep.org/who-we-are/about-us

UNEP. (2018). *The Principles – United Nations Environment – Finance Initiative*. https://www.unepfi.org/blue-finance/the-principles/

UNEP. (2026). *New guide offers practical steps to achieving sustainable blue economies*. https://www.unep.org/technical-highlight/new-guide-offers-practical-steps-achieving-s20ustainable-blue-economies

UNEP. (2017a). *Biodiversity and Ecosystems | UNEP - UN Environment Programme*. https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/regional-seas-programme/biodiv%20ersity-and-ecosystems

UNEP, U. N. (2017b). *Ocean Governance | UNEP - UN Environment Programme*. https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/regional-seas-programme/ocean%20-governance

UNEP. (2020). *Enabling sustainable, resilient and inclusive blue economies | UNEP - UN Environment Programme*. https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/oceans-seas/what-we-do/enabling-sustainable-resilient-and-inclusive-blue-economies

UNESCO. (2026). *Biodiversity: Convention on Wetlands of International Importance*. https://www.unesco.org/en/biodiversity/wetlands

Zanuttigh, B., Nicholls, R., & Hanson, S. (2015). Chapter 1—Introduction. En B. Zanuttigh, R. Nicholls, J. P. Vanderlinden, H. F. Burcharth, & R. C. Thompson (Eds.), *Coastal Risk Management in a Changing Climate* (pp. 1-8). Butterworth-Heinemann. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-397310-8.00001-4

Zhang, Z., Cao, D., Ma, T., Liu, H., & Mao, Z. (2025). International cooperation for a biodiverse future: Opportunities and challenges under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. *Global Ecology and Conservation*, *58*, e03385. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2024.e03385