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UCT researchers join forces in global efforts to save our oceans

Researchers from three departments at the University of Cape Town (UCT) – environmental & geographical sciences, biological sciences and commercial law are part of a new multinational, interdisciplinary project – One Ocean Hub – which aims to transform global responses to challenges facing our oceans by bringing together researchers, organisations and local communities to tackle them.

To transform this relatively fragmented approach, the United Kingdom (UK) Research and Innovation's Global Challenges Research Fund approved an injection of GBP20 million into an innovative hub focused on ocean health. The five-year One Ocean Hub aims to bridge the disconnections between law, science and policy in addressing global ocean challenges. It will do this through transdisciplinary and innovative research and by integrating governance frameworks to balance ocean uses with conservation.

In an era when humanity faces possible societal and environmental collapse, the ocean remains a lifeline. Marine life produces about half the oxygen we breathe, and parts of the ocean absorb more than a quarter of global carbon dioxide. For millennia, it has also been an integral food source for coastal communities and awakened reverence, spiritual connection and wanderlust in the human psyche.

A senior researcher at UCT's Marine Research Institute (MA-RE), Dr Lynne Shannon from the Department of Biological Sciences will lead the development of ecosystem models complemented by indicator-based assessments. From the Department of Commercial Law, Associate Professor Tobias Schonwetter, director of UCT's Intellectual Property (IP) Unit, will be involved in various aspects of IP: from dealing with internal project-related questions about IP to developing a research agenda at the intersection of IP and the maritime environment.

Despite the multi-faceted role, the ocean plays in our wellbeing – and survival – various large-scale challenges are pushing ocean ecosystems beyond their limits. These challenges range from overexploitation and multiple competing uses to pollution and climate change. While many people, institutions and organisations have dedicated themselves to turning the tide on ocean degradation, they are losing ground, in part due to a lack of collaboration and integration.

The project will focus on developing nations in Southern African and the South Pacific: Fiji, Ghana, Namibia, Solomon Islands and South Africa. The UCT departments of environmental & geographical sciences (EGS), biological sciences and commercial law will participate in various One Ocean Hub research areas.

Associate Professor Merle Sowman represents EGS – she is also head of the department – along with Associate Professor Rachel Wynberg and Dr Phililie Mbatha. “Our particular interest here in EGS is to provide a critical analysis of the blue economy, particularly in relation to how ‘blue growth’ impacts local communities,” explains Sowman.

While academic research will play an integral role in the One Ocean Hub, the goal of the programme is also to engage in other related activities that respond to societal needs. A big part of the Hub is dedicated to the translation and dissemination of the knowledge it generates for government and lay audiences. This will include initiatives for capacity development and education, as well as using the arts and theatre to communicate ocean challenges and encourage discussions with stakeholders.

Adds Sowman: “The One Ocean Hub focuses on addressing societal problems in ways that integrate the knowledge of local resource-users and other stakeholders”. “It’s really trying to foster collaboration between researchers and experts, but also those we see as knowledge-holders in local communities.”

The One Ocean Hub gives researchers the opportunity to work with colleagues from institutions across the globe. “The intention is to work collaboratively with other research partners in the Hub on pressing ocean problems,” says Sowman. “We’re all working with a whole lot of different research partners across the world on topics that fall into our areas of expertise.”

Each of the UCT researchers involved in the One Ocean Hub also hopes to make positions available for young researchers to assist with their work.

“Programmes like the One Ocean Hub are wonderful opportunities for young-career scientists to join networks and contribute to meaningful ocean research and management efforts,” says Shannon.

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