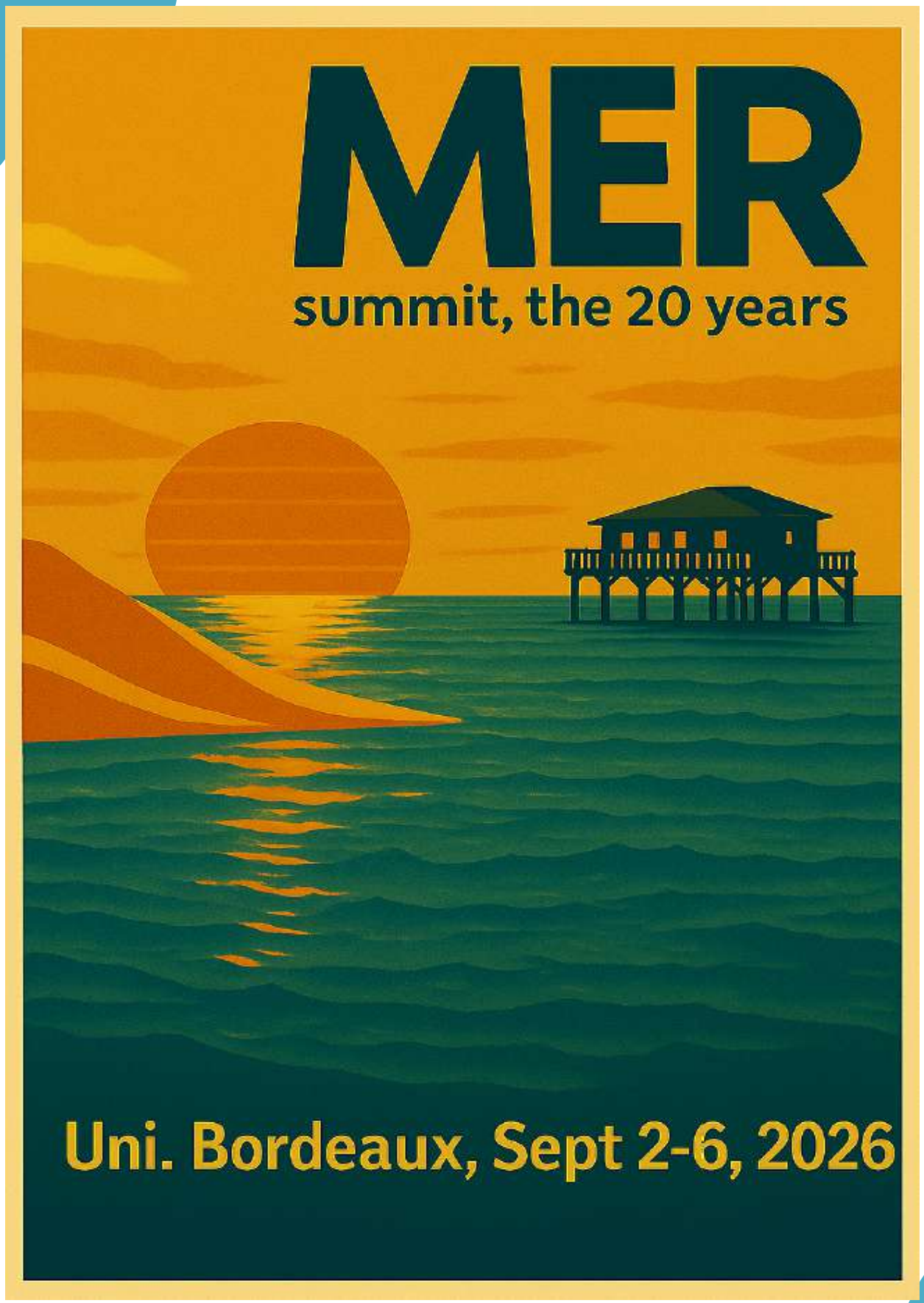


MER Newsletter July 2025

The Editor Column

With great enthusiasm, I join this edition of the MER Newsletter.

The successful collaboration between the University of the Azores (UAc) and the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) began 30 years ago. I still remember how, back in 2009, when I was the Coordinator for Mobility Programs at my Faculty, we took a significant step forward by enhancing Erasmus student mobility between our institutions. This was a key milestone that laid the foundation for deeper academic cooperation.

In 2020, UAc proudly joined the Master MER program as an Associated Partner. In 2022, we took another important step by becoming a full partner of the MER consortium. This journey has been both exciting and rewarding!

One of the most meaningful and challenging experiences for me was leading the accreditation process of the MER2030 program for the Portuguese national Agency (A3ES). The support and collaboration from all partners were crucial to the success of this process. Structuring the academic curricula for the paths that include UAc was also a great—yet fulfilling—challenge, especially for me as an Environmental Health specialist. Thank you all for making me feel like a fish in the water!

Participating in the QSA procedures and contributing to the application for the EU sosMER project has also been a remarkable experience, both professionally and personally. These processes have clearly shown me that what truly matters is the program's outstanding quality and the strength of the MER Community. As our "big boss" Ionan always says: MER is a family! And I surely agree with him!

In the academic year 2023/2024 the first students enrolled in UAc, and it's hard to believe we already have two years of alumni. Time really flies! The insightful contributions and encouraging feedback from these first cohorts have played a key role in enhancing our involvement in the consortium and in the fine-tune our academic pathways.

I look forward to seeing you all at the next MER Summit in Bordeaux, where we will celebrate 20 years of MER. We've charted an incredible course—and the horizon ahead over the next six years looks brighter than ever!

Obrigada, Merci, Thanks — and ESKERRIK ASKO!

Patricia Garcia
Associate Professor
University of the Azores

Ponta Delgada, 5th June, 2025

Index

New leaders at the head of the management team of the Plentzia Marine Station PiE-UPV/EHU January 29th, 2025.

Manu Soto, professor of Cell Biology, and **Nestor Etxebarria**, professor of Analytical Chemistry, take on the roles of director and deputy director for the next six years.

03/03/2025
Photo: Mitxi. UPV/EHU

On January 29, elections were held for the management team of the Plentzia Marine Station (PiE-UPV/EHU). The new management of this Research Center in Marine Biology and Biotechnology is formed by Manu Soto, who leaves the deputy position to take on the role of director, and by Nestor Etxebarria as deputy director. In the words of the new director, during this new period, which will last for the next six years, "we want to continue in the same line, consolidating ongoing strategic projects, with an increasingly prominent presence in our university and in our society, promoting collaboration among researchers and ensuring generational change."

The new management of PiE-UPV/EHU wants to thank Professor Ionan Marigómez, who has held the position of director of the center since its inauguration in 2012, for his dedication and all the work done. Marigómez will continue to be part of the faculty and the Executive Committee of the entity.

The PiE-UPV/EHU is a research and teaching center which has strategic objectives to promote research in experimental marine biology and biotechnology, contribute to postgraduate and doctoral training in marine and environmental sciences, and develop activities for scientific dissemination and specialized training. Between 2020 and 2024, it has secured funding of around 3 million euros annually, and during the same period, more than 300 scientific articles have been published (an average of 60 per year), of which 80% are in journals of the first quartile (Q1) and more than 40% in the first decile (D1). Furthermore, it is a center of excellence in postgraduate training, doctoral studies, and scientific dissemination, with more than 60 doctoral theses completed between 2017 and 2024, and numerous master's theses corresponding to the three Erasmus Mundus programs in which it participates (two as the coordinator of the International Consortium).

Women in Marine Science Day 2025
May 9th, 2025, PiE–UPV/EHU.

Organised and coordinated by Belén González-Gaya and Olatz Ortega Vidales

The 2025 edition of Women in Marine Science Day, part of the RIMER 2025+, marked a turning point — embracing a queer and transfeminist lens, and expanding the idea of who gets to shape marine science today. The event intentionally incorporated gender-diverse and intersectional perspectives, while broadening the concept of "marine science" to include voices often excluded from academic spaces. Beyond the academic-researcher stereotype, the event revealed how science intersects with communication, economy, activism and policy.
Throughout the morning, master's students took part in "Coffee with a Scientist", engaging in open conversations with nine researchers and professionals:

Alexandra Lepper (**Ocean Cluster, Iceland**) Chief Executive Officer
Elisa Sainz de Murieta (**UPV/EHU, Basque Country**) Socioeconomic perspective to climate adaptation
Idoia Fuertes (**NGO Surfrider Foundation, Donostia-San Sebastián**) Project officer
Julia Bohorquez Rodriguez de Medina (**BC3, Basque Country**) Postdoctoral Researcher at BLUEADAPT
Lucía López López (**Oceanographic Centre, Santander**) Permanent position IEO-CSIC
Nagore Gonzalez (**University of Bordeaux & UPV/EHU**) Postdoctoral Researcher in micro-nanoplastics
Rebecca von Hellfeld (**University of Aberdeen,UK**) Postdoctoral Researcher
Uxue Uribe (**UPV/EHU, Basque Country**) PhD student in Environmental Contamination and Toxicology
Vega Asensio (NorArte Visual Science) Scientific illustration, infographics, data visualisation

In the afternoon, a "Role Play" workshop immersed students in realistic career scenarios - from early studies to motherhood, leadership, or remote fieldwork - sparking reflection on **systemic inequalities.**

The day was about **transforming perspectives**. As several guest speakers put it:
"This kind of space is not only necessary — it's essential. These conversations should be part of every scientific curriculum."

To everyone who contributed – from the speakers who shared their stories, to the students who opened up to new ways of seeing – thank you. Your presence made this day a powerful space of **connection, care, and collective transformation**. May these conversations ripple through classrooms, laboratories, and wherever marine science is made.

Dive Into the World of La Mer: The Sea of Opportunity! Always, from everywhere.

La Mer, which means "The Sea" in French, is more than just a name; it's a metaphor for depth, movement and connection. It's a vast, living school where every coastline becomes a new chapter in learning, civilizations converge like tides and waves transport knowledge. Backed by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union, and run in collaboration with top universities including Southampton, Bordeaux, Liège, and the University of the Basque Country, MER2030 is not just simply a master's program but it's an expedition of minds across oceans.

Facebook
Your go-to noticeboard for announcements, program highlights, student spotlights, and alumni news. It's where our global community stays informed and inspired.

Instagram
A colorful, real-time visual diary of student adventures, fieldwork snapshots, behind-the-scenes stories, and campus life across Europe.

LinkedIn
Where the academic meets the professional. Follow us for research updates, internship opportunities, alumni journeys, and blue economy insights.

Spotify
Tune in to the MER mates podcast – real voices, honest stories, and shared passions from students navigating life, science, and the sea. It is a student-led media platform. Through podcasts, photos, reflections, and travel diaries, it captures the vibrant, multicultural life of MER students and alumni across continents and coastlines.

YouTube
Explore video stories, field diaries, and interviews from across the MER 2030 experience.

Last but not least, we come from different seas, but we sail the same wave. **Join the MER2030 voyage where science meets storytelling, and waves build bridges!!**

Podcast second season June, 2025, PiE–UPV/EHU.

Profiting the last week of **RiMER at PiE-UPV/EHU** filled with relevant presentations about marine biodiversity, global change and clean and healthy oceans, some volunteers from the present cohort **took over the podcast mics** to interview a few of the presenters. Therefore, we can finally announce that a **brand new season of MERMATES is being recorded**! New episodes will include some insights on the 2026 MER Summit (see next news to know more), details on "new" MER researchers (actual cohort students, recent PhD students or new staff in town) but also "old" MER researchers (even retired scientists that still now collaborate deeply with the master!) research, and much more to be discovered soon.

Keep tuned!

Bye bye Feli!
July, 2025, Pie-UPV/EHU.

After a few years of managing the MET bureaucracy and student's assistance in Plentzia, we wave Feli goodbye, wishing her all the best in her future in the University Library. As she said in the RiMER event where she was given a beautiful present, "The best of my work during all her years working here has been working with you and for you", so the involvement of the MER community is indeed the best part of this game.

Huge luck and happiness in your next position!

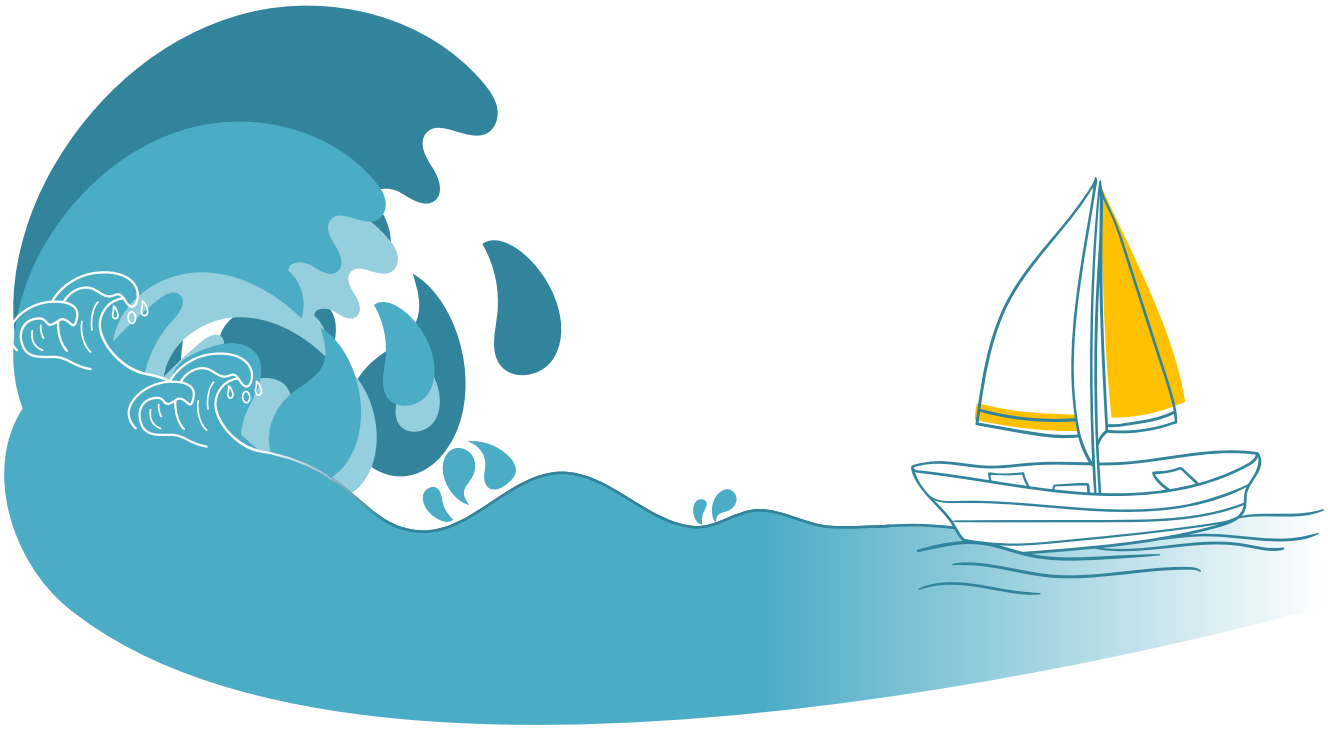
C'est la vie!
July 18, 2025 - 9:47 a.m.

All the consortium members received an email from the European Commission entitled *sosMER – Evaluation results*. The outcome of our Erasmus Mundus proposal popped up. After carefully reading the review, we found that our proposal had been rejected despite a very good score of 86/100. This means we will not receive the Erasmus Mundus label for the new cohort.

Of course, we are all disappointed. However, we will resubmit the proposal next year, improving the very few points that were raised in the comments, and we are eager to face the strong competition. Bad news for MER, but our motivation remains intact and we are fully committed to obtaining the label next year. We have a wonderful team and will do our best to succeed.

We will keep you posted!

The MER Consortium



MER summit, the 20 years

Join us in Bordeaux from Sept 2, 2026!

We will celebrate the 20 years of the MER program during the MER Summit. This event will hold on the Talence campus of the University of Bordeaux, France.

Over 3 days, you'll experience scientific presentations, workshops, roundtables, and inspiring personal stories from students, alumni, and researchers exploring topics in marine science and oceanography.

The weekend will be all about enjoying local culture with regional excursions and fun activities.

Travel grants will be available for eligible participants.

MORE DETAILS COMING SOON - STAY TUNED!

Domaine du Haut-Carré
Université de Bordeaux
43 Rue Pierre Noailles
33400 Talence

MER 2026 Photo Contest!

To mark 20 years of the MER program, we're launching a photo contest for all MER students and alumni!

Share your most memorable MER moments — whether it's a breathtaking fieldwork shot, a hilarious lab fail, or raw behind-the-scenes glimpses of real MER life.

We'll have multiple categories, from artistic and quirky to everyday life and "epic fails."

The top 3 photos will win exciting prizes and will be showcased during the MER Summit 2026 in Bordeaux.

Cohort 2006-2008

Cohort 2022-2024

Contaminants in marine mammals. A thesis story

By: Ane Elezgarai, Heloise Gilbert, Rebecca von Hellfeld

The UN has declared that we are facing a 'triple planetary crisis': climate change, loss of biodiversity, and environmental pollution are interlinked threats, with severe impacts on planetary and organismal health. Legacy contaminants, such as mercury and other heavy metals, although naturally occurring, were emitted intensively during the industrialisation, as they are linked to petroleum extraction and fossil fuel combustion. Man-made compounds like persistent organic pollutants (POPs), on the other hand, are released either through fertiliser/ pesticides use (think DDT!), improper waste disposal, accidental releases, industrial emissions or by-product manufacture, but also from fossil fuel combustion and waste incineration.

Heavy metals and POPs are known to be highly toxic which adversely affect human health and the environment. POPs can persist in the environment for hundreds of years and they tend to bioaccumulate and biomagnify in complex marine food webs. Since discovering their detrimental impact on organisms and ecosystems, global efforts have been made to address their release and transport through treaties such as Stockholm Convection (since 2004). Similarly, after many environmental releases of mercury leading to devastating impacts on society and ecosystems[1], the Minamata Convention on mercury was developed, being the younger global treaty adopted in 2013, governing the use and disposal of mercury for all ratified members. However, their persistent nature of these contaminants means that they can still be detected in several environmental matrices, highlighting their pervasive nature.

This is particularly devastating, as these contaminants are not easily metabolised and excreted, meaning that top marine predators accumulate them to alarming concentrations. Marine mammals, given their trophic position, long-life span, and complex physiology, they are particularly vulnerable to bioaccumulation and biomagnification of these contaminants. At the same time these characteristics make marine mammals valuable indicators of human and ocean health, allowing us to infer temporal trends of whole foodwebs.

The keen reader will have spotted a substantial flaw in the use of marine mammals as indicators for environmental contamination: How do you plan on getting those samples? Their often cryptic and still not entirely understood ecology and life offshore means that skin biopsies are hard to obtain and little else is known about the animals sampled. Further, with POPs accumulate in fatty tissue (something that marine mammals have A LOT of), mercury can be best traced in organs and has little affinity for fats. Thus, we shift our focus onto stranded animals. In most cases, the animals are dead long before they reach the shore, and research and reporting schemes such as the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme (SMASS) conduct post mortems to determine a cause of death as well as take samples that feed into a range of life history studies.

[1]For those interested, look up the mad hatter's disease and Hunter-Russel syndrome. Or read up on the Minamata Bay release, the poisoned grain of Iraq, the ongoing poisoning of Grassy Narrows and Whitedog native peoples in Canada, the continued suffering of the Yanomami, or the tragic death of Dr Karen Wetterhahn.

In some cases, however, animals are still alive when they strand. Such was the case in July 2023, when 55 long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) stranded on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. One animal was successfully refloated, but the remaining 54 individuals could not.

A year later, 77 pilot whales stranded on Sanday, Scotland, with no surviving animals. In these so-called mass stranding events (MSEs), the response team, along with trained volunteers, works against the clock, obtaining samples and conducing necropsies (animal autopsies) before decomposition is too advanced. These tragic events allow us to look not only at the contaminant burden, bacterial or viral load, reproductive health and status, and a plethora of other parameters, but to do so in the context of an entire pod. Pilot whales form matrilineal pods, wherein the social structures are built around female family lines. This removes a degree of variability compared with single animal strandings, and allows to investigate e.g., contaminant transfer from mother to foetus or neonate offspring.

Pilot whales stranded on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. Credit: Cristina McAvoy/BDMLR

Two MSc thesis projects were built around these two MSEs, assessing mercury and POPs in the animals. Heloise focussed on mercury in the 2024 MSE at the University of Aberdeen, aiming to infer possible relationships between the skin and internal organs. This has been done for bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops turncatus*), but by testing it on other species, we might be able to improve monitoring and conservation of marine mammals in the future. Ane is validating a protocol for the multitargeted analysis of both legacy and new POPs in marine mammal tissues at the University of the Basque Country. For this, she developed the method using non-marine mammal samples, tested the approach on tissue samples from Short-beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) samples for initial validation, and is then applying it to the samples of three mother-foetus pairs from the 2023 MSE.

5. MARINE STORIES

While Heloise mostly faced problems like samples exploding in the freeze drier, trying not to let the smell get to her, handling large datasets, and the joys of modelling complex data, Ane faced entirely different struggles.

First, it was decided to validate a protocol for analysing various POPs with different polarities in multiple, complex, matrices (fat, liver, and muscle). POPs accumulate in fat due to its lipophilicity, which means that most studies focus on this matrix. However, marine mammal fat (or blubber) is complex, being part of the endocrine system and formed of different layers with unique functions. This makes it a very challenging matrix to work with, and Ane has been working on adapting existing protocols to circumvent these issues. Liver and muscle tissues are seldom analysed for POPs, and thus little can be found in the literature on adapting protocols to these matrices.

The largest, and most surprising, struggle, however, has been getting the samples from Aberdeen to Plentzia. These animals are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), meaning that extensive paperwork is needed to transport these samples across country borders. Adding the impacts of Brexit into the mix meant that a shipment that was meant to take 3 days extended over more than 3 weeks[2]! Now that the samples have arrived, we can begin the validation step of the process for the three matrices with the dolphin samples.

Wish them good luck!

Interesting references:

Guo, W., Pan, B., Sakkiah, S., Yavas, G., Ge, W., Zou, W., Tong, W., & Hong, H. (2019). Persistent Organic Pollutants in Food: Contamination Sources, Health Effects and Detection Methods. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, **16**(22), 4361. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16224361.

Gworek, B, Bemowska-Kałabun, O, Kijeńska, M, Wrzosek-Jakubowska, J. (2006). Mercury in Marine and Oceanic Waters-a Review. *Water Air & Soil Pollution* **227**(10):371. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11270-016-3060-3.

Kershaw, JL, Hall, AJ (2019). Mercury in cetaceans: Exposure, bioaccumulation and toxicity. *Science of the Total Environment* **1**(694), 133683. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.133683.

Li, Q. Q., Loganath, A., Chong, Y. S., Tan, J., & Obbard, J. P. (2006). Persistent organic pollutants and adverse health effects in humans. *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health*. Part A, *69*(21), 19. https://doi.org/10.1080/15287390600751447.

[2]Don't even get us started on DHL! Many phone calls and frustrated emails later, the samples arrived at the research station. Thankfully!

STARESO Spring 2025: Corsica Concours and Research

Narrated by Acuña, ALA, Leonard, S, Aponte, MG.
With the revision of all authors and Bucher, L.

We, Lilly, Solène, María, and Azul, are an interdisciplinary, multicultural group of young female scientists from Germany, France, the Dominican Republic, and Argentina, respectively. We gathered under the supervision of Dr. Sylvie Gobert at the Oceanology Lab of the University of Liège, where we are researching various aspects of Corsican marine biocenoses, including meadow mapping, trace analysis, and monitoring of *Posidonia oceanica* transplants and *Cladocora caespitosa* colonies.

In April-May 2025, as part of a collaborative science outreach initiative, we spent an enriching time at the STARESO Marine Station (Punta Revellata), where we engaged Belgian high school students through hands-on workshops on marine science, biodiversity, and ecological awareness—while also advancing our MSc thesis work and sharing some of our preliminary findings. Each of us led a different session, aiming to bridge scientific knowledge with the students' curiosity and everyday experiences. Here's a brief look at what we each shared, highlighting our contributions to the workshops and research activities.

Workshops for High School Students

Lilly • (Geomorphology & Currentology): Cultivating Interest Through Hands-On Exploration

Figure 2. Lilly teaching basic Currentology to the students.

Opening the week, Lilly delivered a workshop focused on geomorphology and later another on currentology. Both were designed to provide high school students with a foundational understanding of how the geophysical processes in Corsica have shaped, and at times restricted, the settlement of the region's current biodiversity. She engaged the students in practical experiments using tanks filled with coloured water to explore water density differences and simulate ocean currents.

Additionally, she deployed sediment cores, allowing students to observe the sediment grains deposited in the bay in front of STARESO. They learned to distinguish sediments originating from *P. oceanica* meadows from those of sandy banks, while contributing ideas on how to separate the organic and mineral components of the samples, suggesting a variety of thoughtful approaches. These hands-on experiences sparked curiosity and fostered insightful discussions about how physical processes shape the distribution and diversity of marine and coastal habitats, and how the benthic communities, in turn, influence the sediments and the physical processes themselves.

Figure 1. How are Major Ocean Gyres formed?

Azul · (Marine)Plants vs. Algae: Engaging Curiosity Through Food and Exploration

Figure 3. Me holding a *P. oceanica* specimen to show it to the students.

On Wednesday, I led a workshop exploring the differences between marine plants and algae, beginning with an edible icebreaker: peanuts, almonds, and sunflower seeds, each labelled with their respective plant families. This sparked immediate curiosity and set the tone for an interactive session. I then invited students to reflect on what defines a plant or an alga. Their responses were both accurate and thoughtful (Brainstormings below), highlighting traits such as photosynthesis, chlorophyll, CO_2 exchange, and the presence of roots, leaves, and flowers for plants, and aquatic habitat, saltwater, buoyancy, and stickiness for algae.

To help clarify the distinctions—especially between marine plants and macroalgae—we examined their evolutionary history and structural differences, particularly the presence or absence of true organs. In a hands-on session, students explored terrestrial plants, a *P. oceanica* specimen, and local macroalgae, applying what they had learned to distinguish between them. Their curiosity led to spontaneous questions about plant adaptations, offering a great opportunity to discuss ecological trade-offs and evolutionary strategies.

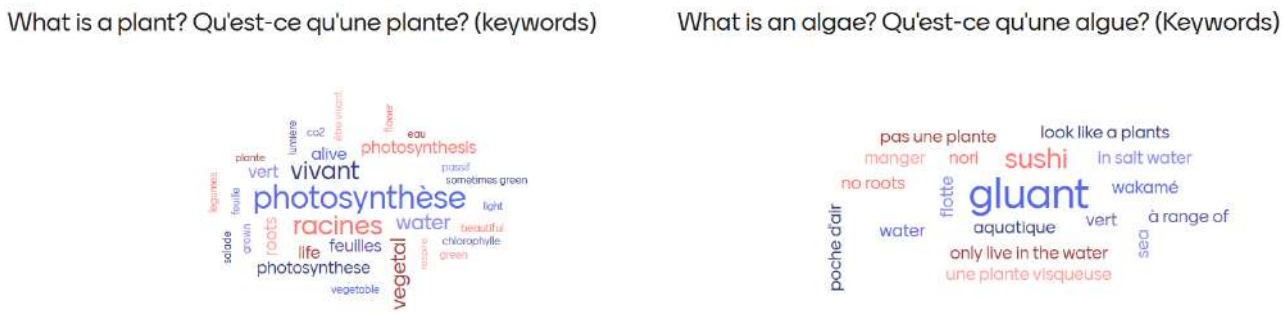


Figure 4. Brainstormings of What is a Plant *vs* What is an Algae, answered by the students.

Solène · From Epidemics to Posidonia meadows: Why Ecological Models Matter

The next call was for Solène: "In this workshop, I aimed to introduce students to different ecological domains while highlighting the importance of modelling in real-world situations. We began with a group discussion: What is a model? What ecological phenomena would be useful to model? Their answers were interesting and relevant, and often reflected a natural curiosity."

"Together, we explored population ecology. I showed them how population dynamics can be represented using a simple but essential modelling tool: compartment models, which often form the basis for more complex simulations.

Figure 5. The workshop on Modelling attracted a great audience.

We then examined the concept of evolutionary trade-offs, focusing on epidemiology, where students built their own compartment model to predict the course of an epidemic—an engaging way to show the importance of such models. I concluded the session by sharing the topic of my own research internship: studying the spatio-temporal dynamics of *Posidonia oceanica* meadows in the Bay of Calvi.

This was an opportunity to show how spatial modelling and interpolation techniques help create maps of trace element concentrations, demonstrating how ecological modelling supports both understanding and conservation."

Figure 6. Students wondering how to represent ecological phenomena with a model.

In between our workshops, a climatology professor had the students present the daily weather forecast. A physics professor taught them physics using AI. Dr. Sylvie Gobert and Dr. Krishna Das, along with Lina Garzón, a marine biologist and colleague from MER+, delivered workshops about biodiversity across all phyla in the bay's meadows, marine mammals, and fish diversity, respectively. All of these activities connected and complemented the topics we covered.

Other Activities at the Marine Station

Figure 7. Costa Rican, Argentinian, Dominican, and Colombian STEM colleagues with hands-on experience in epiphyte cleaning.

Apart from the workshops, we had the chance to work on our respective theses mentored by the PhD candidate Arnaud Boulenger and Dr. Stéphane Roberty. Lilly and Solène worked tirelessly on their modelling, pushing their computers to the limit. Maria dedicated herself to intensive fieldwork—diving, testing tags for her *C. caespitosa* experiments, and monitoring. Meanwhile, I brought together the entire Latin girls crew at STARESO (from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Costa Rica) to help me remove the epiphytes from *Posidonia* leaves—an effort soundtracked by our favourite Latin playlists, passionately karaoke-ed.

María · Pillow Coral Health in a Changing Mediterranean Sea.

"My time at STARESO was fully dedicated to my thesis research on the Mediterranean pillow coral *C. caespitosa*. Unlike most Mediterranean species, this coral behaves similarly to tropical ones by forming bioconstructions, making it a particularly important species to monitor. Although its presence in front of STARESO had been recorded before, no formal monitoring or health assessment had ever been conducted. Given the increasing frequency of marine heatwaves and other local stressors, our goal was to develop an initial health assessment of *C. caespitosa* under these changing conditions."

5. MARINE STORIES

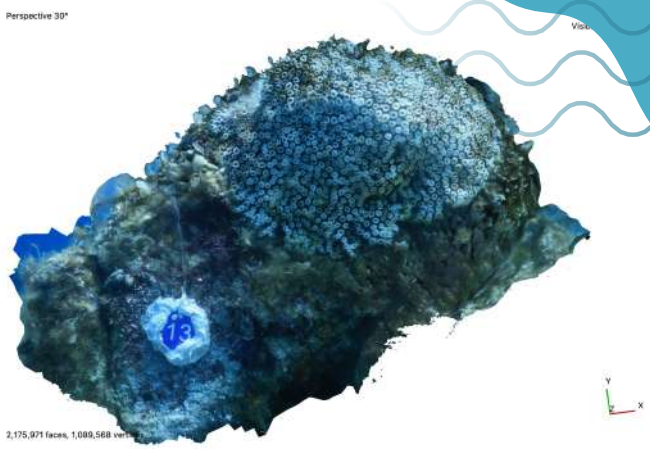


Figure 8. Tagged *C. caespitosa* colony reconstruction.

"The fieldwork began with the identification and tagging of *Cladocora caespitosa* colonies, accompanied by GPS mapping, drone imagery, and Structure-from-Motion (SfM) photogrammetry to document their distribution and generate high-resolution 3D models. A Google Earth map was created to visualise the location of all identified colonies, including several 3D reconstructions—feel free to check out the QR code. The health status of the colonies was also assessed during this stage. While at STARESO, we observed an algal mucilage—mainly *Nematochrysopsis marina* and other brown filamentous algae—not previously reported in the area, which may add further stress to the coral. This observation reinforced our decision to collect samples for physiological analysis, oxidative stress biomarkers, and trace metal concentrations. Seasonal variation is being assessed using tissue samples from October 2024 and May 2025, along with photosynthetic activity monitored daily and seasonally via DIVING-PAM. The collected data is currently under analysis to assess colony condition and stress responses; however, we hypothesise that this coral's resilience is linked to its symbiotic algal clade and the ability to undergo 'rejuvenation' (which means that a new polyp grows on top of the previously dead polyp)." - shared María with enthusiasm.

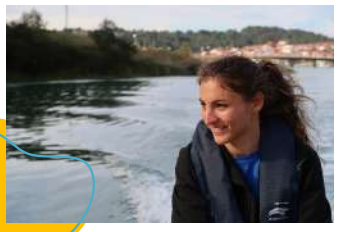
Figure 10. Macro of pillow coral polyps.

Figure 9. Map. **SCAN ME!**

Towards the end of the week, those of us working with Posidonia shared some preliminary results with our supervisor and the STARESO team, who continuously collect environmental data, to keep them updated on our progress and ask for their feedback regarding underwater observations and the environment they know so well. We also sought the advice of our supervisor, Dr. Sylvie Gobert and STARESO's Director, Dr. Pierre Lejeune.

All in all, it was a very fruitful time at the Marine Station, both in terms of research and education, and we are very thankful to STARESO, the University of Liège, and Erasmus+ for providing the funding to make our endeavour possible.

Tifanie Briaudeau



Current position: Post-doctoral assistant in Ghent University, Belgium

Why have you chosen working in (marine) science? When did you make this decision?

My interest in marine science really began during the Msc MER. After a general Bsc in biology and geology, I really enjoyed switching my focus to the marine environment, getting a wide range of modules related to marine sciences. This master programme was an excellent first step for this. Even more than that, it is during my master's thesis that I discovered the world of marine ecotoxicology while working at the marine station of Plentzia (PiE-UPV/EHU). There was no doubt I had found my field of interest and the right place (and team!) for it.

Which is the best thing about working in marine science for you?

No two days are ever the same in research. Each day is a new learning opportunity , with fresh challenges that require us to adapt constantly. You don't know what tomorrow will bring and although it can be daunting at times, it is also what keeps us so motivated. In such a dynamic environment, the best way to thrive is by being part of a supportive and positive team where everyone can rely on each other.

Which is the "B side"?

The instability of the position can be tough. Being able to adapt to new research challenges is one thing but having to constantly chase contracts and new positions can be difficult and tiring. Unfortunately, that kind of uncertainty can sometimes take your focus away from the research itself.

Which are your personal strengths and weaknesses as (marine) scientist?

I'm not sure about my own strengths, but I do know the qualities I see in my colleagues that I hope to achieve some day. I really look up to researchers who manage to stay focus and true to themselves throughout the process. They create a positive and supportive environment around them, fostering new collaborations between departments and institutions, going towards more interdisciplinary science. They are innovative in any context and always think outside the box.

What is your relation with MER? For how long have you been involved in the Master MER?

I joined the MER master in 2011. I studied in Bordeaux (France), Leioa (Basque Country) and Southampton (UK). We were of the first MER students to go to the marine station of Plentzia for our internships and that was an incredible experience!

Tamer Abdelaziz

Current position: Project manager of the ECTplus master/
Post doctoral researcher in the University of the Basque Country

Why have you chosen working in (marine) science? When did you make this decision?
I was inspired to go into the marine science career during the bachelor degree in biology back in Egypt, as. We had some elective courses on marine ecology and marine science and I had the chance to do research in the red sea, seeing the vast diversity there inspired me to follow this career.

Which do you think is your main labor achievement?
I think my greatest achievement in my career is that I feel I have contributed to the research on copepods and to the use of them as bioindicator species. During my PhD, I feel I have developed some useful tools on the experimentation and the study of copepods, these tools are now implemented by several researchers in our research centre. I am proud of that!

Which is the best thing about working in marine science for you?
The best thing in research is the excitement you get when you discover something cool! I love the feeling when you are doing an experiment and cannot wait to see what will be results! Sometimes I analyse the results of the experiment as soon as I finish to see what I will get.

Which is the "B side"?
I feel the B side of the career hits after you finish your PhD and you discover the real world. I think one of the biggest problems is the lack of stability in many of the cases during this career. After finishing the PhD you may find yourself getting post doctoral contracts for a couple of years, then afterward you go back to square one. I believe that it is very important to actively look for more stable position (faculty, researcher contract) after 2 or 3 postdocs maximum, and not get stuck in the "Postdoc loop".

Which are your personal strengths and weaknesses as (marine) scientist?
I think my personal strength is a bit of patience and independence while conducting experiments. But my weakness is that I prefer to work alone on my own research. Also I think I can also be stubborn.

What is your relation with MER?
I was from the 2013-2015 MER cohort, but I am still involved in the master. I participate in teaching in one of the master courses called EMRASS, which has a submodule teaching students how to conduct bioassays using copepods. In addition, I participate in master theses defences, providing internships to students etc.

What would be your advice for the MER students and their future career in marine science?
My advice is to believe in yourself! you need to believe that you can do great in this career and can fulfil your career goals. During your journey, you will face a lot of obstacles, and will also meet people who will tell you that you will never go so far. But believe me you will go this far! You will contribute to science, even if you feel it's a small contribution, it's worth it.

MER2030 at EMA GA 2025: A Journey of Representation, Connection, and Pride by Dibash Deb. Paris, May 2025

In February 2025, I was honored to be selected as the Program Representative (PR) for my Erasmus Mundus master's program, MER2030. Just three months into this exciting role, I had the incredible opportunity to represent my program at the EMA General Assembly 2025 held in the heart of Paris, from May 15 to 17.

With the generous support of our Consortium, as well as encouragement from my host university director and program coordinator, I traveled to Paris to attend the 2nd Annual EMA Conference and 19th General Assembly. It was an inspirational three-day event attended by over 30 other PRs chosen from more than 200 Erasmus program PRs; I was very honored to be one of them. This rare opportunity reinforced my appreciation for how MER2030 prioritizes student empowerment and thus open doors for international exposure and growth, which can deeply shape our future careers.

"The MER Master was conceived as a crucial hub to build up a sustainable network with students from all cohorts," shared our UPV/EHU Director Professor Manu. *"This event in Paris is a beautiful example of that vision in action — where students like you bring our mission to the world."*

During the event, I connected with a diverse group of students, alumni, committee members, and past EMA leaders including the former President and Vice President. I proudly presented MER2030 and shared its mission with the global EMA community. A major highlight was my role as a voter in the EMA elections, reinforcing the importance of student voices in shaping the network's future.

One especially proud moment was the launch of this year's EMA magazine, which included an article by our program coordinator introducing MER2030's development and vision. Sharing this with others allowed participants to discover the depth of our program and generated excitement around the upcoming 20th anniversary summit of MER in Bordeaux, planned for 2026.

"A diverse community of people engaged in marine issues has emerged through MER," noted our Program Coordinator Professor Ionan. *"Events like this give our students valuable visibility and empower them to build lifelong professional connections across continents."*

Following the success of the event, the newly elected EMA Vice President, Shahin S. Eity, reflected on the significance of collective participation: "*Thanks to the support of partner universities and dedicated individuals, our members had the opportunity to network, share knowledge, and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of international education and collaboration—values at the heart of the Erasmus Mundus vision.*"

This experience not only elevated the visibility of MER2030, but also reaffirmed the importance of global dialogue and student-driven impact. **I left Paris with a deep sense of pride, connection, and responsibility knowing that the MER community is stronger than ever, and that I am part of a growing legacy rooted in sustainability, collaboration, and shared vision.**

Participation of Andrea Herrera, a MER Scholar, in The Third United Nations Ocean Conference Nice, June 2025

I'm **Andrea Herrera**, a girl from the tropics and a marine ecologist and shark scientist from El Salvador, currently in her second year of master's in Marine Environment and Resources (MER2030). As a young ocean and shark professional, having the opportunity not only to attend but to share my work and the work on behalf of the Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOPs) and The Marine Migratory Species Network (REMM) was truly an experience, so I thought I should share my bits and main takeaways from my time at UNOC-3, starting with the >60,000 steps made that week... Was it a conference or a leg workout?

The Third United Nations Ocean Conference 2025 (UNOC-3) is genuinely one of the very few events where *everyone* —from every corner of the world—gathered together. I'm talking about high-ranking officials to citizens sharing a room. The conference happens every three years, so expectations run high, and attendees have a list of things they wish to tick off. Every sector is expected to share their progress, define new goals and ways forward, renew commitments, create new ones, and take actual action. This year was exactly that, with a twist: I got to experience it firsthand with my participation as a master's student, Latina, and regional representative.

During UNOC-3, I was honored to be one of the panelists at the joint event co-organized by the ECOP Programme, EU4Ocean, and MENA Oceans hosted at the UNESCO Ocean Literacy Pavilion. This event "Ocean Literacy Practices: Knowing, Feeling, Acting for the Ocean," showcased Global Ocean Literacy Best Practices through a series of three panels—*Knowing, Feeling, and Acting*—and audience engagement; the event weaved a narrative of collaboration and offered tangible support on how to build a more profound and multi-dimensional connection with the ocean through diverse knowledge systems, emotional resonance, activism, advocacy, and inclusive partnerships.

I shared the floor with other incredible speakers leading meaningful projects and sharing their knowledge and experience. I got to share my current master's research in blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) photo-identification in the Azores Archipelago, carried out at the Marine Science Institute OKEANOS–University of Azores—a project aiming to build the baseline for this understudied and highly fished species.

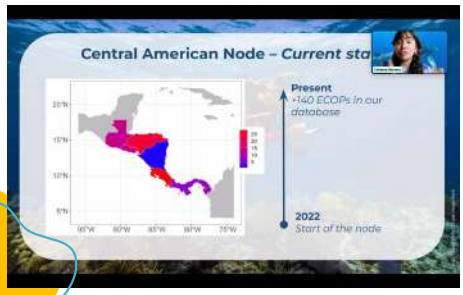
I emphasized the importance of cross-sector collaboration in academia and the actions taken at ECOP Central America to include everyone in the "*knowing*" in my role as regional coordinator for the Capacity and Development hub and as a team member of the ECOP Central America Node. I believe meaningful science is only possible when the main pillars include other groups and people, such as the local community and anglers, who made the data collection for my master's thesis possible.

Photo credit: Laura Khatib Lakiss

Consequently, I was invited as a speaker at the official virtual UN side-event called "Ocean Solutions in Action: Early Career Ocean Professionals Bridging Science with Policy and Community-Based Action." The panel's primary focus was to share strategies for advancing applied, transdisciplinary, and community-engaged research, discuss pathways for translating science into effective policy and action, and offer advice for fellow ECOPs navigating these critical intersections. Nature Now International, Migramar, ECOP Central America, Stanford Center for Ocean Solutions, and Stanford's new student-led Ocean Science and Policy Group led this virtual and diverse side event.

In this opportunity, I showcased the ways young professionals navigate the interfaces between science and politics, shared the vision of the ECOP Central America node, and discussed the challenges that we, ECOPs face in these spaces—highlighting how language inclusion, job placement, and formal recognition to young professionals is essential and is lacking at present. Furthermore, alongside team member Viviana Páez, we shared the initiative between MigraMar and ECOP Central America, in creating and launching the Marine Migratory Species Network (REMM) for Latin America.

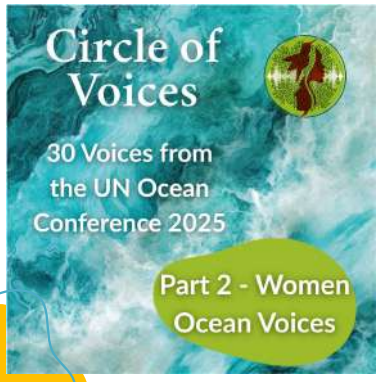
This network of young professionals aims to bridge the intergenerational knowledge gap, spread opportunities in the region, and advance cross-sector collaboration, supporting initiatives regarding the conservation of marine migratory species in the area, all language inclusive.



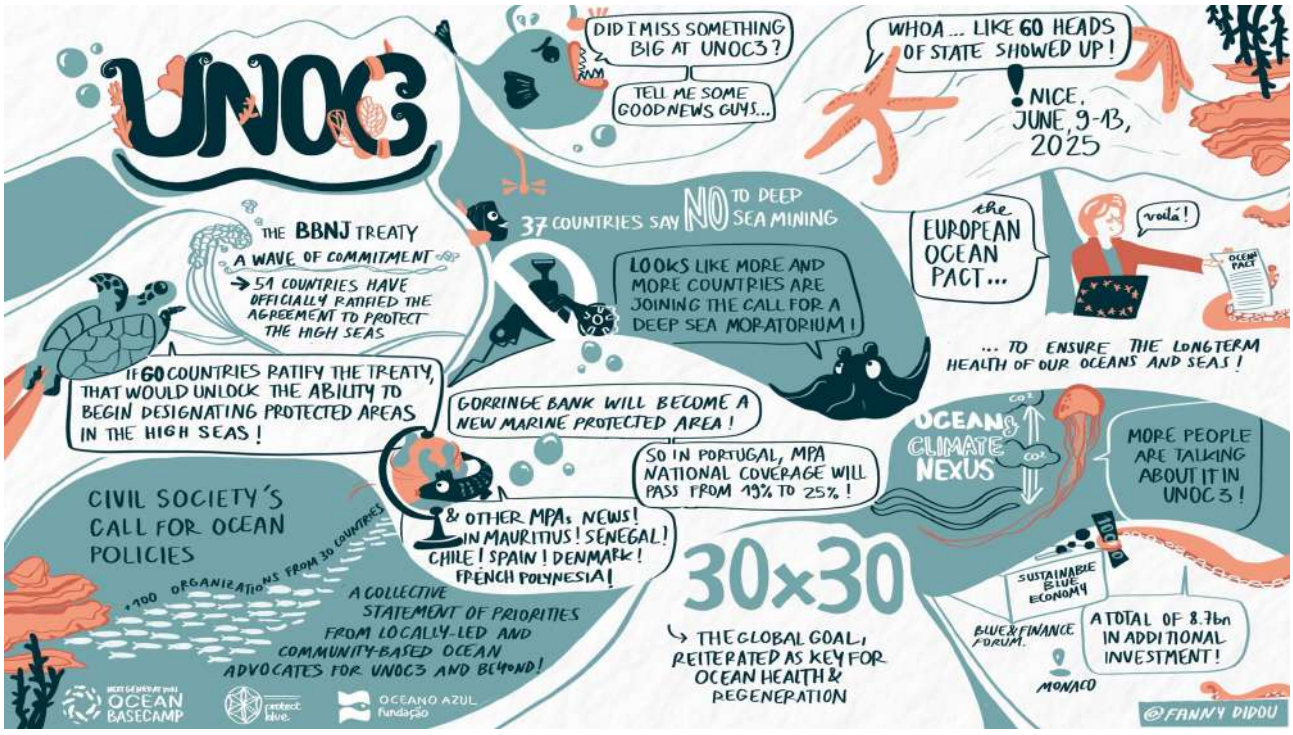
7. PRESS RELEASE AND OPINION LETTERS

Becoming an active member of such networks is the motor of a long dream of giving back to El Salvador and the region—with my current assets, not waiting until the “next” chance comes by—and facilitating opportunities, capacity development, and community build-up I wish I had when I started my academic journey as Little Miss Shark.

Sharing our stories matters, telling our dreams to people, too. The ultimate goal is to serve as a force of inspiration and support to other Latinas and Latinos, so they can get out there and make their dreams come true. Tell us your story, we want to listen.



Bonus for those who made it till the end! Listen to The Circle of Voice podcast, episode 30, Voices from the UN Ocean Conference 2025, Women Ocean Voices. An episode hosted and produced by Louise Romain, where I got to share my fresh thoughts post-UNOC alongside another 29 inspiring, vibrant, and multidisciplinary women leading global projects in different sectors, united by the Ocean.



Open source illustration by Fanny Didou, piling up the main takeaways after UNOC

Monserrat Fragueiro Sabaini

MER Cohort: 2021-2023
Birth place: Argentina
Current location: Viña del Mar, Chile

As a graduate of the 2021–2023 cohort, I am currently working as a Benthic Communities Analyst at SGS, a Swiss multinational company whose Chilean branch, Ecotecnos, focuses on environmental and oceanographic studies. My work is primarily focused on projects located along the Humboldt Current system and various coastal regions throughout the country. Over the past year, I have been deeply involved in both field sampling and subsequent data analysis, contributing to multidisciplinary research initiatives aimed at understanding benthic ecosystems, monitoring biodiversity, and supporting sustainable marine resource management. This position has also enabled developing and improving data interpretation, ecological assessments, and the use of advanced analytical techniques in marine biology and oceanography.

One of the recent highlights was the opportunity to present our findings at the **XLIV Congreso de Ciencias del Mar**, an important national conference in Chile focused on the study and conservation of marine ecosystems. Here, I shared the long-term findings of an environmental research project with the scientific community and engaged in meaningful discussions.
To culminate an enriching year, I have been selected to participate as a trainee in the 5th NoSoAT (North to South Atlantic Transect) Shipboard Training Expedition aboard the icebreaker R/V Polarstern. Organized by the Alfred Wegener Institute (AWI) and supported by POGO, and the Nippon Foundation, this expedition is a welcome challenge from the day-to-day grind of work. Above all, it is a unique opportunity for my professional growth by gaining hands-on experience with advanced oceanographic techniques and expanding my knowledge of marine climate dynamics. I'm excited to take part in this extraordinary experience and contribute to cutting-edge marine science!

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Valeriia Vakhitova

MER Cohort: 2021-2023
Birth place: Vladivostok, Russia
Current location: Nairobi, Kenya

For my MER thesis I have contacted FAO and was able to get an internship at the RFMO for Mediterranean and Black Sea (GFCM) in Rome. That allowed me to get a foot in the door of the UN world, where I was able to stay until now. After my internship I received a short-term consultancy contract at FAO Fisheries division to study women's employment in the worldwide fisheries.

After my consultancy was over I started working for the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) in Cambridge, where I contributed towards Protected Planet Report 2024 – I was helping countries report their data on protected areas both marine and terrestrial, as well as OECMs. But all through my work there I was craving more ocean-related tasks, so I never stopped applying for other positions.

As a result I was accepted into a Young Talent Pipeline cohort run by Inger Andersen (Executive Director of UNEP) as a UN Volunteer in the role of Ocean Governance Specialist at UNEP HQ. My work here started in March of this year, but ever since I moved to Nairobi, Kenya I felt a lot more useful to the oceans than in my previous role. I am a part of the Regional Seas Programme secretariat team, which means that I support 18 ocean regions in knowledge exchange and capacity building. Most of my work relates to the soon-to-be-ratified High Seas Treaty (or BBNJ treaty) and 30x30 Target 3 of Global Biodiversity Framework. I help develop policy briefs and other tools that assist in implementing the BBNJ treaty and making sure that all regions of the world have equal access to its benefits.

In the picture you can see me talking to a group of young ocean leaders in Nice, France at the third UN Ocean Conference. At the beginning of this year I was selected as one of the forty Sustainable Ocean Alliance (SOA) Ocean Leaders Fellows from all over the world. Since then we've been holding weekly meetings on ocean leadership, attending one on one coaching sessions and were able to attend two conferences in person – 11th Our Ocean Conference in Busan, Korea and the UNOC3 in France. This opportunity was possible due to the collaboration of Sustainable Ocean Alliance and Dona Bertarelli Philanthropy. It is a pilot year for the fellowship – but I would advise everyone from the MER community to apply for the SOA Fellowship next year!

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