

3. COORDINATING BODY ON THE SEAS OF EAST ASIA (COBSEA)

Summary of role: *The Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) is a regional intergovernmental forum and decision-making body for policy coordination for the East Asian Seas Action Plan. It comprises nine countries – Cambodia, China, Indonesia, RO Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam. The COBSEA Secretariat is hosted by Thailand and administered by UNEP. Key funding support has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency for the establishment of SEA Circular.*

Summary of work: *COBSEA has adopted a Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP MALI) in 2008 that has been revised in 2019, including the establishment of a Working Group on Marine Litter to guide its implementation. One of the distinctive components of this plan is that it includes the active removal of land-based and sea-based litter rather than being primarily focused on upstream management and future leakages. Other notable components include implementation of international legal instruments, the establishment of a regional expert group, strengthening and harmonisation of monitoring programmes, as well as knowledge sharing, scientific cooperation and outreach.*

Keywords/research fields: *The Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia; COBSEA; function and mandate; East Asian Seas Action Plan; Action against pollution from marine plastics, Regional Action Plan, SEA circular, RAP MALI, Regional Capacity Centre for Clean Seas, Regional Node of the Global Partnership on Marine Litter*

3.1 Function and mandate

The Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) was established by the 1981 East Asian Seas Action Plan as its policy coordination and intergovernmental decision-making body. It promotes compliance with existing environmental treaties based on member countries' goodwill. The COBSEA Intergovernmental Meetings (IGM) is the decision-making body that determines the content of the East Asian Seas Action Plan, reviews its progress and approves its programme of implementation. Today, it has nine members: Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, RO Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Its Secretariat is based in Bangkok, hosted by the Government of Thailand and administered by UNEP.

The aims of the East Asian Seas Action Plan are:

- (i) Assessment of the state of the marine environment;
- (ii) Management of those marine and coastal development activities which may have an impact on environmental quality or on the protection and use of renewable marine resources on a sustainable basis; and
- (iii) Development of suitable coordinating measures for the successful implementation of the Action Plan.

The management of marine plastics is therefore included in the mandate of COBSEA. The Strategic Directions 2018-2022 further strengthen COBSEA's mandate to address marine pollution including plastic litter, with a focus on three themes: (i) land-based marine pollution; (ii) marine and coastal planning and management; and (iii) an overarching governance theme. See: <https://bit.ly/COBSEAstrategicdirections>.

COBSEA's funding comes from different sources, depending on activities/projects and spending types (e.g. UNEP, GEF or bilateral donors including states and private actors).

3.2 Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP MALI)

COBSEA's work on marine plastic 'started' with the development of the 2008 Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP MALI) in January 2008. The 2008 RAP MALI was recently revised to address emerging regional priorities and global frameworks, and the 2019 RAP MALI was adopted by the 24th IGM of COBSEA in June 2019 in Bali, Indonesia. The 2019 RAP MALI provides an overarching regional framework for addressing marine litter in the East Asian Seas as a transboundary issue. It promotes consolidation, coordination and facilitation of efforts towards integrated management of marine litter, comprising actions in relation to preventing and reducing marine litter from land-based as well as sea-based sources, monitoring and assessment, and creating enabling conditions. A Working Group on Marine Litter (WGML) was established to provide strategic and technical support to the IGM and the COBSEA Secretariat, and to and facilitate information exchange and regional cooperation towards the implementation of the RAP MALI. See: <https://www.unenvironment.org/cobsea/events/intergovernmental-meeting/twenty-fourth-intergovernmental-meeting-coordinating-body-seas> and <https://bit.ly/COBSEArapmali>.

The RAP MALI comprises four main action items and proposed sub-actions for further development by the WGML:

- Action 1. Preventing and reducing marine litter from land-based sources
 - Legal and economic instruments
 - Integrated waste management
 - Removal of existing litter and its disposal
- Action 2. Preventing and reducing marine litter from sea-based sources
 - Legal and economic instruments
 - Removal of existing litter and disposal
- Action 3. Monitoring and assessment of marine litter
 - Expert monitoring group (under WGML)
 - Regional coherent national marine litter monitoring programmes (in line with regional guidance and global GESAMP guidelines)

- Action 4. Activities supporting the implementation of COBSEA RAP MALI
 - Regional and international cooperation and reporting (including synergies across regional frameworks such as ASEAN)
 - National planning and policy frameworks
 - Research activities
 - Information, education, outreach and involvement of stakeholders
 - Training and capacity building

3.3 SEA circular – solving plastic pollution at source

SEA circular is an initiative implemented jointly by COBSEA and the UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), aimed at reducing and preventing marine litter in South-East Asia through better management of the plastic value chain, strengthened scientific evidence, and improved marine litter monitoring, planning, outreach and coordination. See: www.sea-circular.org/about-sea-circular.

This 2018–2023 project (US\$6.3 million) promotes a people-centred value chain approach across four outputs:

- Market-based solutions towards 'less plastic wasted';
- Strengthening the scientific basis for decision-making;
- Outreach on marine litter and plastic pollution; and
- Regional networking and multi-stakeholder constituency engagement.

More information on the project, its partners, knowledge products and events is available at: www.sea-circular.org/ and in the Project fact sheet available at: <https://openaid.se/activity/SE-0-SE-6-5102017601-ASI-41010/>.

3.4 Knowledge sharing and capacity building efforts

To support participating countries' efforts to strengthen evidence-based marine litter planning and to build capacity to assess, monitor and address sources, flows and fate of marine pollution, COBSEA is further developing its institutional mechanisms, knowledge sharing platforms and initiatives in line with the RAP MALI.

To this end, COBSEA participating countries requested the Secretariat, in consultation with the WGML, to develop the East Asian Seas Regional Node of the GPML (see [Part 1, Section 3.3.3](#)). The purpose of the Regional Node is to support implementation of the RAP MALI by providing a regional marine litter knowledge management and networking mechanism engaging a range of stakeholders addressing marine litter. The Regional Node will facilitate access to scientific evidence, tools, methodologies, training and peer learning, and will seek to catalyse research and development and leverage funding and project development opportunities to address regional needs and priorities.

COBSEA countries further requested the Secretariat to explore the establishment of the new Regional Capacity Centre for Clean Seas (RC3S) in Bali, Indonesia, as a COBSEA Regional Activity Centre to offer regional capacity building services toward reducing and preventing marine litter.