

Regional Roundtable on Ocean Health and Legal Capacity in the Pacific



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Strengthening Ocean Health and Legal Capacity across the Pacific

From June 2 to 3, 2026, ocean advocates and legal practitioners from across the Blue Pacific Continent gathered in Suva, Fiji, for a regional roundtable titled *“Charting the Waters and Surfacing Solutions: A Regional Roundtable on Ocean Health and Legal Capacity in the Pacific.”* Co-hosted by the Asian Research Institute for Environmental Law (ARIEL) and the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO), this gathering brought together 19 legal minds and ocean guardians from Fiji, Solomon Islands, Palau, Vanuatu, Samoa, Cook Islands, Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea.

CELCOR was represented by Policy Lawyer Miss. Jewels Mofapi, who joined the Pacific delegation in which 17 of the 19 participants were women. This strong female representation ensured that deliberations on marine conservation were grounded in women’s rights, community-first approaches, and gender-inclusive perspectives.

Key Gaps identified in Pacific Ocean Governance

Over two intensive days, participants validated findings from months of focus group discussions, community interviews, and surveys. The roundtable assessed priority areas established by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation (PMAFF), which includes dedicated legal capacity for civil society organizations and governments, stronger policy and legal instruments for ocean conservation, a pipeline of civil society lawyers and community advocates, training programmes for government ministries and judiciaries, ocean protection litigation strategies, and the safety and security of environmental defenders.

The current gaps and the state of legal capacity for ocean conservation in the region.

- A persistent disconnect that exists between statutory environmental laws and customary land and sea rights, which continues to weaken the practical protection of marine areas and customary resource ownership.
- Emerging industries such as Deep-Sea Mining (DSM) pose unprecedented challenges to state sovereignty, traditional livelihoods, and marine ecosystems across the Pacific.
- Short-term funding cycles limit the ability of civil society organizations to retain long-term legal talent, leaving many remote communities without affordable and consistent legal representation.
- Low prosecution rates for environmental crimes, persistent corruption, and siloed international law discussions continue to prevent environmental policies from being meaningfully enforced.
- Environmental defenders also face growing physical, legal, and online security risks, while formal protection mechanisms remain limited across the region.



Solutions and Recommendations

On the second day, working groups shifted from mapping threats to co-creating practical, region-wide solutions for strengthening ocean governance and legal capacity across the Pacific.

The proposed recommendation include a range of practical solutions to strengthen ocean governance and legal capacity. These included developing culturally tailored legal literacy resources and translating laws into local vernacular languages so that customary resource owners can better understand and apply them. The plan also called for dedicated regional legal networks, self-sufficient environmental law associations, mandatory training in customary and ocean law for judicial officers, dedicated environmental courts, and the introduction of the “Guardians of Moana” framework to protect environmental defenders.

Participants also emphasized the importance of translating major international legal developments, including climate change Advisory Opinions from the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, into accessible local languages for customary resource owners. They further highlighted the need to build a stronger pipeline of public interest lawyers, expand environmental courts and regional dispute mechanisms, and establish formal regional and national frameworks to recognize and protect environmental defenders both offline and in digital spaces.

