

Humans need to do better if we're to avoid ocean system collapse

July 20 2020



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A new relationship between humanity and the ocean is required to secure the continuity of the diverse life support roles provided by the sea, according to a paper published in *Nature Communications* on 17 July 2020.

Titled "A transition to sustainable ocean governance", it describes three key transition pathways that can make complex ocean systems more resilient and ensure a more sustainable future.

"Complex systems are such that small disruptions can have disproportionately large impactful system-wide effects," explains one of the authors, Tanya Brodie Rudolph, a research fellow at the Centre for Complex Systems in Transition at Stellenbosch University South Africa.

Brodie Rudolph says, "the COVID-19 crisis is the classic example of this well-known '[butterfly effect](#)': from the over-exploitation of nature in a Wuhan wild meat market to a global pandemic, this crisis demonstrates the absolute necessity to build the kind of resilience that enables effective, agile responses to sudden system changes.

"This is as true for the complex ocean system we depend on. Should the ocean system collapse, the resultant crisis could be as devastating as the COVID-19 crisis. In fact, it is now more important than ever to understand [complex systems](#) and how they can be made more resilient for the benefit of people, the economy and the environment."

Three key transition pathways

The first of the three key transition pathways is the need to re-configure governance—including top-down and bottom-up nested scales from local to international—and informed by a shared vision. The second is by empowering people who depend on the ocean commons through knowledge sharing for adaptive learning and conferring rights to the ocean as a public good. The third is by reforming ownership in stewardship terms through mechanisms such as certification and pre-competitive collaboration, which will provide incentives and help build accountability.

She points to the Marine Stewardship Council's fishery certification system and rights-based fishery reforms like catch shares as promising examples of such innovations.

"These pathways are important because human wellbeing relies on the Biosphere, including natural resources provided by ocean ecosystems. As multiple demands and stressors threaten the ocean, transformative change in ocean governance is required to maintain the contributions of the ocean to people," explains Brodie Rudolph.

"The health of the ocean is crucial for humanity. We need to take better care of this shared resource, for the health and prosperity of current and future generations, for the environment, for biodiversity and for the climate. The way we have governed the ocean in the past has not been effective, and hasn't reflected these complex relationships."

Brodie Rudolph says their paper suggests a new way of thinking about the ocean as a shared resource and shows how social and economic systems can adapt and transform.

"A governance system which recognizes the complex role the ocean plays as a shared resource, and builds on changes already underway, would support the transition to a thriving relationship between humanity and the ocean."

More information: Tanya Brodie Rudolph et al, A transition to sustainable ocean governance, *Nature Communications* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41467-020-17410-2](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-17410-2)

Provided by Stellenbosch University South Africa

Citation: Humans need to do better if we're to avoid ocean system collapse (2020, July 20) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-07-humans-ocean-collapse.html>

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