



Photography: Joe Short

# ACCELERATING OCEAN ACTION:

## The Power of Strategic Communication

### Roundtable Summary Report

On 10th June 2025 at the UN Ocean Conference in Nice, Communications INC convened a roundtable discussion on **Accelerating Ocean Action: The Power of Strategic Ocean Communication**. The event took place at Ocean House and was hosted by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in collaboration with Communications INC, the UN Ocean Decade Foundations Dialogue, and Global Optimism.

The roundtable formed part of the Advancing Strategic Ocean Communication project, led by Communications INC. It aimed to identify priority areas of action to advance the use of strategic communication in the ocean space. A wide range of stakeholders, including philanthropic foundations, impact investors, communications professionals, scientists, and civil society members attended the event.

We are grateful to all attendees for the frank and generous nature of the discussion. This report seeks to **summarise key themes and insights from the roundtable**, and in no way captures all of the interesting case studies, thoughts, and nuanced reflections that were shared. The discussion was conducted under Chatham House rules. As such, comments are not directly attributed to participants.

# KEY PRIORITIES FOR ACCELERATING THE USE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TO ACHIEVE OCEAN ACTION

## 1 REFRAME STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AS AN INVESTMENT, NOT A COST

Throughout the roundtable, participants reiterated the need for strategic communication to be seen as a structural component of change. If we want to scale up the application of science to unlock investment in ocean action and to shift public will and behaviours, then communication must be treated as central to the investment thesis, not a peripheral output.

Strategic communication de-risks bold action. It builds legitimacy, earns trust, and creates the conditions that allow ocean science, policy, and finance to land and to scale. For funders and investors, this means communication should be recognised not as overhead, but as infrastructure or, as one participant put it, ‘a vertical in the investment stack’.

For this to happen, participants emphasised the need for a mindset shift. Strategic communication should be seen as more than simply storytelling. Rather, it should be seen as the infrastructure that shapes the context in which stories are understood, trusted, and acted upon, by providing connective tissue that links science, policy, and public engagement. When treated as infrastructure, strategic communication becomes a driver of impact in its own right.

## 2 INVEST IN INTELLIGENCE BY DESIGNING COMMUNICATION AS A TWO-WAY SYSTEM

The importance of listening surfaced repeatedly during the roundtable. Multiple respondents highlighted the need for strategic communication to be designed as a feedback system, not a megaphone. Participants stressed the need to move beyond one-way outreach and instead build communication systems that are explicitly designed for feedback, and integrating data that offers a richer understanding of the political, cultural, and geographic context in which ocean investments operate.

A two-way system introduces a mechanism for learning, trust-building, and course correction. Over the course of the discussion, participants shared examples of the ways in which their own communications had been adapted and made more effective in response to increased audience understanding. Just as science refines hypotheses through observation, communication strategies must evolve in response to what people value, fear, and believe.

An insights-based approach not only makes communication more effective, it also unlocks better investment decisions. Feedback-rich strategies can help identify risks earlier, surface new opportunities, and support more relevant, locally grounded adoption of science and innovation.

### 3 BACK THE SCIENCE OF COMMUNICATION, NOT JUST THE COMMUNICATION OF SCIENCE

While ocean funding often tracks outcomes like carbon reduction, biodiversity, or regulatory progress, it rarely applies the same rigour to communication. Metrics such as message resonance, shifts in audience perception, or behavioural traction are still underdeveloped. As a result, promising strategies go untested, and key opportunities to improve reach and effectiveness are missed.

To close this gap, participants emphasised the need to treat strategic communication as a discipline in its own right. As one participant put it, ‘we need to focus on the science of communication, not just the communication of science.’ The ocean community has long applied scientific methods to understand ecosystems. It must now apply the same mindset to how people understand, connect with, and act on ocean issues. Not all communication is equal and we need to be able to define what ‘good communication’ looks like.

Participants emphasised that when communications are designed and measured with intention, they do more than raise awareness. They help build trust, shift behaviour, open new markets, and accelerate uptake of science, innovation, and policy or political change. For funders and investors, this presents a clear opportunity. Communication, when informed by evidence, can amplify the return on philanthropic, scientific, financial, and advocacy investments.

### 4 FOCUS ON THE FUNDAMENTALS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Roundtable participants referenced a multitude of ways in which they used strategic communication. Different stakeholders had different audiences, engagement processes, and objectives. However, the heart of the conversation returned time and again to the importance of mastering the fundamentals of effective communication. Participants reflected on the need to refocus on the building blocks of effective communication: a clear and resonant message, a trusted and relatable messenger, and a delivery method that aligns with the habits and values of the intended audience.

Communication cannot rely on one-size-fits-all narratives; it must be tailored with care and grounded in a deep understanding of who the audience is and what matters to them. As one participant commented, ‘It’s not just about what we say, but who says it, how, and through which channel’. The same message can land differently depending on who delivers it and how it is framed, whether that’s through mainstream media, digital platforms, or within local community networks.

Equally critical is identifying and empowering trusted messengers who reflect the communities they engage. Participants underscored the importance of nurturing diverse and credible voices, from decisionmakers to Indigenous leaders to journalists to investors. One attendee noted the challenge of finding and nurturing the right messengers, stressing this as essential to building legitimacy and trust. This underscores the long-term nature of a strategic communication approach.

## 5 BUILD KNOWLEDGE ECOSYSTEMS TO CONNECT SCIENCE, POLICY, SOCIETY AND CAPITAL

Even within our roundtable discussion, it was clear that participants from different sectors use different language and vocabulary to talk about similar challenges and solutions. This signals a deeper issue within the ocean space: Knowledge may exist, but without translation and connection, it cannot travel.

Making ocean science available is not enough. It must be made accessible, intelligible, and actionable across the full system of actors. One participant highlighted the need to ‘de-jargonise’ the science to make it relevant.

Participants suggested the importance of building shared knowledge ecosystems or hubs as a way to do this, i.e. communication environments where different forms of insight (scientific, Indigenous, financial, lived) can co-exist, circulate, and inform each other. This would better enable storytelling that crosses sectors and the creation of tools that support decision-making. It would also enable better framing of ocean science through different messages, messengers, and media that speak to the needs and values of different audiences.

## 6 USE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TO REPOSITION THE OCEAN FROM NICHE TO NECESSARY

Much of the roundtable discussion focused on how to drive forward the use of strategic communication. Yet a large component of the discussion also focused on *why* we need to better make the case for ocean action and how strategic communication can help achieve that. As one participant reminded the roundtable, SDG14 remains the least funded of all sustainable development goals, reflecting a persistent perception of the ocean as marginal, complex, or disconnected from mainstream policy and investment priorities.

Strategic communication can be used to address this challenge. Participants stressed that compelling, evidence-based narratives are essential to reposition the ocean as central to climate, food security, economic resilience, and geopolitical stability. On a societal level, communication must connect ocean issues to identity, livelihood, health, and pride of place.

Participants who have worked on communication in other sectors reminded the roundtable that the ocean lends itself to compelling and effective communication. Unlike climate messaging, which can sometimes feel abstract or doom-laden, the ocean is a tangible, relatable presence that resonates with people in many different ways. Having such a compelling and positive asset to draw on provides a strong foundation for effective communication.

## CONCLUSION

The roundtable offered an exciting opportunity to expand the dialogue of the **Advancing Strategic Ocean Communication** project to a wider group of stakeholders. We're deeply grateful to all who attended for their generosity of insight, while also recognising that time and format constraints resulted in some voices not being heard. As we continue to advance the role of strategic communication in the ocean space, we welcome new partnerships and opportunities to move forward together. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this summary, or explore ways to collaborate, please contact Natalie Hart - [natalie@communicationsinc.co.uk](mailto:natalie@communicationsinc.co.uk).





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