

Policy Brief: Making Maldivian fisheries climate-ready

Strengthening the legal and policy framework for a changing ocean

The issue

Climate change is already changing the environmental conditions on which Maldivian fisheries depend. Warming seas, ocean acidification, coral bleaching and changing ocean conditions pose growing risks to tuna, reef and livebait fisheries and to the communities and livelihoods that depend on them.

The Maldives already has a strong foundation for responding. The Fisheries Act explicitly recognises climate change adaptation and mitigation as a responsibility of the Fisheries Ministry, while existing fisheries regulations and management plans provide tools for managing fishing effort, protecting habitats and spawning areas, monitoring fisheries and adjusting management measures.

The main gap is therefore not the absence of a fisheries governance system, but that climate risk is not yet systematically built into how that system operates.

Climate change is recognised at the highest level, but most fisheries regulations and management plans do not translate this mandate into specific requirements, indicators or management responses. Climate projections are not routinely incorporated into decision-making, there are no climate-linked triggers for adjusting management measures, and environmental information is not systematically integrated with fisheries data.

Where are the key gaps?

Climate science is not systematically informing fisheries decisions. Fisheries management already relies heavily on science and monitoring, but there is no formal requirement to consider climate projections, stock and habitat vulnerability, or indicators such as sea surface temperature, acidification, hypoxia or coral bleaching when making management decisions.

Management is adaptive but not yet climate-responsive. Existing laws allow management measures to be amended and plans to be reviewed. However, there are no defined climate-related thresholds that trigger an earlier review or management response. Advisory committees also lack clearly assigned responsibilities for bringing climate information into fisheries decisions.

Some of the important fisheries habitats are protected, but not specifically for climate resilience. Existing laws protect some species, spawning areas and some sensitive habitats. However, seagrass is not recognised as an important fisheries habitat in fisheries legislation, and there is no framework for identifying and protecting climate refugia or other "climate-critical" fisheries habitats.

Low-carbon ambitions have not yet been embedded in fisheries governance. Plans exist to increase renewable energy and energy efficiency in fishing and processing, but these ambitions are not currently reflected in fisheries legislation, licensing or reporting requirements

Five priorities for policy

1. **Put climate risk into every fisheries management plan.** Require new and revised fisheries management plans and regulations to assess climate risks, explain how these risks have influenced management measures, and demonstrate alignment with national climate and adaptation policies.
2. **Turn climate information into management action.** Establish a small set of indicators, such as catch per unit effort, size structure, habitat condition, or defined climate/extreme events, that can trigger earlier review of fisheries management measures when conditions change. Advisory committees should have an explicit responsibility to consider climate risks and information.
3. **Protect climate-critical fisheries habitats.** Explicitly recognise coral reefs, and associated seagrass and mangroves as climate-critical habitats for fisheries. Existing spatial management powers could be used to protect refugia, spawning sites, nursery grounds and important baitfish areas through permanent or temporary measures according to ecosystem condition
4. **Build resilience for fishers as well as fish.** Develop climate-responsive social protection and livelihood measures, using the fishermen's registry to help target assistance following severe catch failures or climate-related damage. Diversification, value addition and alternative fisheries should be assessed and supported particularly for communities most exposed to climate-related changes.
5. **Make fisheries data climate-ready.** Integrate basic environmental information with existing fisheries monitoring and reporting systems and strengthen data sharing between the Fisheries Ministry, Maldives Marine Research Institute and environment authorities. Research should prioritise questions with direct management relevance, particularly changes in tuna distribution and the relationship between coral bleaching, baitfish and reef fisheries.

Implementation matters

The review also identifies an important practical challenge: **better policy on paper will not be enough.**

Stakeholder consultations identified uneven implementation of existing management plans, inactive advisory committees, limitations in enforcement, under-use of existing fisheries and VMS data, coordination challenges between fisheries and environment authorities, and chronic human and financial resource constraints. Reform should therefore focus on **making existing systems work better rather than creating a new layer of institutions.** This means activating and resourcing advisory committees, improving coordination and data sharing, strengthening implementation and incorporating climate considerations into existing regulatory and management processes.

The policy message

The Maldives does not need to build a new fisheries governance system to respond to climate change. **It needs to make the existing system climate-responsive.**

The Fisheries Act already provides the mandate, and existing management plans, regulations, monitoring systems and advisory structures provide much of the machinery needed. The next step is to translate the national climate mandate into day-to-day fisheries decisions: using climate information to anticipate change, adjusting management when conditions shift, protecting habitats that provide resilience, and supporting fishing communities through climate shocks. This is also the central conclusion of the legal review.

