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MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING ON THE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT OF MARINE TURTLES AND THEIR HABITATS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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Bonn, Germany, 8-11 December 2026
Agenda Item 5.5

OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF THE IOSEA SITE NETWORK

(*Prepared by the Site Network Working Group*)

Mandate:

- WP #42: *Establish a working group17 to further revise the Site Information Template required for proposal of sites and the associated evaluation criteria and scoring instructions. It will deliver its outputs to the Secretariat by 30 June 2025 for circulation to the Signatories for their comments within two months. The Secretariat will circulate to Signatories the final proposals for intersessional adoption by correspondence in order to enable their use in the run-up to MOS10.*
- WP #43: *Consider nominating IOSEA Network Sites under legally binding mechanisms, such as those under the Ramsar Convention, to achieve additional support and recognition.*

Summary:

- The IOSEA Site Network Working Group considers that reform is needed to clarify the Network's purpose, reduce the complexity of nomination and assessment, improve participation and make recognition more useful.
- This paper proposes discussion of the Site Network's purpose, its relationship with Important Marine Turtle Areas, a 5-10 year vision for success, and three possible operating models: an ecological site network, a conservation action and stewardship recognition model, or a hybrid model.

Action requested:

- Note the progress made so far
- Exchange views on the options proposed
- Provide guidance on next steps

Options for the Future Direction of the IOSEA Site Network

1. Purpose of this paper

IOSEA Signatories agreed at MOS9 to review the IOSEA Site Network. The IOSEA Site Network Working Group (WG) was established and broadly agree that reform is needed because informal feedback suggests that the current nomination and assessment process is complex and time consuming, participation is limited, and the purpose and benefits of being included in the Site Network are not sufficiently clear.

This paper seeks to help clarify the IOSEA Site Network's current purpose and operating model moving forward. It incorporates feedback from the WG and Sub-Regional Focal Points meeting of 15 October 2026 and is intended to support consultation with Signatories through regional groups. Note: this document is intended to be used by the IOSEA Site Network WG members to consult Signatories, and a separate worksheet will be provided which outlines how members can approach their regional Focal Point groups to discuss pathways forward out of session to ensure Signatory voices are heard.

Before considering detailed nomination criteria, forms or assessment criteria, it is proposed that the WG first seek agreement on:

1) the purpose of the IOSEA Site Network;
2) how the IOSEA Site Network should complement (rather than duplicate) the Important Marine Turtle Areas (IMTA) process;
3) what success for the IOSEA Site Network looks like in 5-10 years; and
4) which broad operating model should be explored in regional groups.

Agreement on these questions would provide a clear foundation for subsequent decisions about the initiative's name, structure, eligibility criteria, nomination process, recognition mechanisms and ongoing commitments.

2. Why is change needed?

The IOSEA Site Network was established to promote the long-term conservation of sites of regional and global importance to marine turtles and their habitats. However, WG discussions have identified a number of challenges with the current model including:

- the purpose of the Site Network is not sufficiently clear;
- relatively few sites have been nominated/included;
- conservation outcomes and benefits of recognition are unclear;
- the nomination and assessment process is complex and time consuming (despite efforts to streamline the nomination form);
- incentives for Signatories and site managers to participate in the Site Network are limited;

- ecological importance, management effectiveness and social and cultural considerations are currently combined within the assessment process;
- some listed sites continue to experience degradation; and
- the term “Site Network” may not adequately reflect the people, partnerships, management efforts and initiatives that underpin successful marine turtle conservation noting changing the name may require

WG discussions have instead emphasised the importance of recognition, commitment, participation, learning and collaboration, rather than complex scoring and assessment.

3. Proposed purpose for discussion

A possible future purpose could be:

> *The IOSEA Site Network aims to recognise places where conservation actions are being undertaken for the benefit of marine turtles and their habitats, while promoting partnerships, knowledge exchange, community engagement and continuous improvement across the IOSEA region*.
>
> *Or*
>
> *The Site Network provides formal IOSEA recognition to the people, communities and partnerships undertaking marine turtle conservation at particular places, including through management, monitoring, community stewardship and applied research. Recognition would highlight their conservation commitment, strengthen engagement with Signatory governments and encourage continuous improvement across the IOSEA region*.

This would represent a shift from recognising ecological importance alone towards recognising and supporting active conservation effort, stewardship and sustained commitment.

Note: This wording is provided as a starting point only. The WG is invited to consider what the initiative should fundamentally seek to achieve before determining its future structure or name.

4. Relationship with Important Marine Turtle Areas (IMTAs)

An important consideration is ensuring that the future initiative has a clear purpose that complements, rather than duplicates, the Important Marine turtle Areas.

At a conceptual level, the two initiatives could serve different functions:

Important Marine Turtle Areas (IMTAs)	**IOSEA Site Network**
Identifies areas of biological importance to marine turtles	Recognises places where conservation action and stewardship are occurring
Primarily science and evidence based	Primarily action, commitment and participation based
Identifies where important marine turtle habitat occurs	Recognise where people are actively working to conserve marine turtles and their habitats
An area can be important regardless of whether management is currently occurring	Recognition would require active conservation, management, monitoring, engagement or other demonstrated commitment
Can identify areas where additional protection or management may be needed	Can recognise and support existing conservation effort
Provides spatial information to support conservation planning	Provides recognition, connection, learning and opportunities for collaboration
Not endorsed by governments	Government (IOSEA Signatories) endorsed

Under this approach, the initiatives would be complementary rather than competing. An IMTA could also be an IOSEA Site Network site where active conservation and stewardship are occurring. However, an area would not necessarily need to be an IMTA to receive IOSEA recognition if it supports meaningful marine turtle conservation activity.

The WG should consider whether this distinction accurately reflects the intended relationship between the two initiatives.

5. What would success look like

Possible 5-10 year vision

> *The IOSEA Site Network is a vibrant international community of recognised sites across the IOSEA region, where governments, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, local communities, researchers, site mangers and other partners are actively working to conserve marine turtles and their habitats.*
>
> *Note: the Site Network sites may be connected through a community of practice that enables them to exchange knowledge, share lessons and solutions, build partnerships and strengthen conservation outcomes (funding dependent).*

Success would therefore not simply be measured by the number of sites recognised, but by whether recognition results in an active and useful regional conservation outcomes.

Indicators of success could include:

- Participation and reach
    - Hundreds of recognised sites across the IOSEA region
    - Broad participation across Signatory States and geographic regions
    - A mechanism that allows new sites to join without an unnecessarily burdensome assessment process.
- Recognition and resourcing
    - IOSEA recognition has value to participating sites and the people working at them.
    - Recognition can assist sites to demonstrate commitment, build partnerships and potentially support fundraising and resource mobilisation.
    - Recognition provides visibility to sustained conservation efforts, achievements and commitments at participating sites.
- Active conservation
    - Sites demonstrate ongoing conservation, management, monitoring, threat reduction, community engagement or other relevant activities.
    - Recognition encourages sustained and, where possible, long-term conservation commitments.
    - Sites are encouraged to strengthen their activities over time, if needed.
- Connection and learning
    - Site managers and partners participate in an active IOSEA community of practice.
    - Site managers regularly exchange experiences, challenges, lessons learned and successful approaches (funding dependent).
    - Opportunities exist for peer-to -peer learning, mentoring, webinars and regional exchanges.

    - Knowledge generated at individual sites can inform conservation elsewhere in the IOSEA region.
- Community and partnerships
    - Recognition supports meaningful participation by local communities and Indigenous Peoples, where relevant.
    - Partnerships between governments, communities, NGOs, researchers and other organisations are encouraged.
    - Recognition helps successful local initiatives gain regional and international visibility.

6. Options for the future initiative/Site Network

Option 1: Retain an ecological based Site Network

The Site Network would continue to primarily recognise sites based on their ecological significance to marine turtles, with improvements made to simplify the existing nomination and assessment process

- Key features
    - Ecological significance remains the primary basis for recognition.
    - Existing criteria are reviewed and simplified.
    - Nomination and assessment processes are made less burdensome.
- Potential advantages
    - Represents the least change from the existing model.
    - Maintains continuity with the original purpose of the Site Network.
    - May require fewer institutional changes.
- Issues to consider
    - Potentially substantial overlaps with IMTAs.
    - Does not fully respond to WG's emphasis on people, management, engagement and conservation initiatives.
    - Ecological recognition alone may provide limited incentive for site managers to participate.
    - May not achieve the vision of a large, active community of connected sites.

Option 2: IOSEA Recognised Sites (conservation action and stewardship model)

The Site Network would shift from identifying ecological importance towards recognising and supporting places where active marine turtle conservation is occurring. Recognition could encompass activities such as:

- Active management
- Community-led conservation
- Monitoring and long-term datasets

- Research supporting management
- Formal protection or other effective conservation measures
- Partnerships
- Education and engagement
- Demonstrated conservation commitment

The nomination process could be substantially simplified and designed around recognition rather than detailed scoring against multiple assessment criteria.

A flexible or tiered system could recognise different forms or stages of conservation commitment. For example, recognition could acknowledge:

- Active conservation and community engagement;
- Established management, monitoring or partnerships; and
- Sustained long-term stewardship, potentially including 10-year and 20-year commitments.

Alternatively, sites could receive recognition for particular strengths, such as long-term monitoring, community stewardship, protected-area management, partnerships or applied science, without requiring every site to meet every criterion.

- Potential advantages
    - Provides a clear distinction from IMTAs.
    - Directly responds to WG discussions about recognising people, management efforts and initiatives.
    - Lowers the barrier to participation and could substantially increase the number and diversity of participating sites.
    - Provides a strong basis for developing a community of practice.
    - Allows recognition to encourage improvement and long-term commitment rather than rewarding past achievements.
    - Could provide greater visibility and value to site managers and local conservation projects.
- Issues to consider
    - Represents a significant conceptual change from the existing Site Network.
    - New recognition criteria and governance arrangements would need to be developed.
    - The appropriate minimum threshold for becoming a site would need to be agreed.
    - Consideration would be needed regarding what commitments accompany recognition e.g., reporting and/or participation in a community of practice.
    - Current Site Network sites could be grandfathered into the revised initiative.

Option 3: Hybrid ecological and stewardship model

The Site Network would retain recognition of ecological importance while also recognising conservation action and stewardship. This could operate through separate categories, streams or recognition pathways. For example, ecological recognition could be based on:

- Importance for nesting, migration or foraging;
- Population significance;
- Ecological evidence; and,
- Other relevant biological criteria.

Whereas, conservation and stewardship recognition could be based on:

- Active management;
- Monitoring;
- Community engagement;
- Partnerships;
- Protection;
- Applied research; and
- Long-term commitment.

Note: Sites could potentially qualify through one or both pathways.

- Potential advantages
    - Retains the original ecological purpose of the Site Network.
    - Allows recognition of conservation action and community engagement.
    - Provides flexibility for sites with different strengths.
    - Could create an explicit pathway connecting IMTA identification with conservation implementation.
- Issues to consider
    - More complex to explain and administer.
    - Risks retaining potential duplication with IMTAs.
    - Multiple streams could recreate some of the complexity the WG is seeking to remove.
    - The purpose of the initiative may remain unclear if the ecological significance and conservation implementation are given equal weight.

7. Questions for regional group discussions

Potential questions for regional groups to consider:

1. Purpose: what should the primary purpose of the future of the Site Network be?
2. Relationship with IMTAs: Is the proposed distinction between IMTAs and the IOSEA Site Network clear and useful? Is duplication acceptable?
3. Future model: Which of the three broad models should IOSEA pursue, noting duplication risk with IMTAs:
    a. Ecological site network
    b. Conservation action and stewardship recognition
    c. Hybrid model
4. Success: What should success look like in 5-10 years? Is the vision of hundreds of active and connected sites appropriate?

Follow up meeting(s) or Survey Monkey questions noting these questions can be further developed/refined once feedback on the first round of questions has been received and the direction is clear.

5. Recognition: What should a site be recognised for?
6. Entry threshold: What minimum level of activity or commitment should be required to become an IOSEA 'site'?
7. Levels of categories: should recognition include different levels, pathways or categories to acknowledge long-term management, monitoring, protection, science, partnerships, community engagement or other strengths?
8. Commitment: Should recognised sites commit to anything in return for recognition? For example, periodic reporting, continued conservation activity or participation in knowledge exchange?
9. Benefits: What would make IOSEA recognition valuable to site managers, communities and Signatories?

IOSEA Site Network: Regional discussions worksheet

Purpose: Seek IOSEA Signatories views on the future direction of the Site Network to inform the Site Network Working Group's review.

Region: _____ **Date:** _____ **Discussion lead:** _____

Key points for participants

- **Why a review?** Signatories agreed at MOS9 to review the Site Network. Working Group discussions have highlighted limited participation, complex nomination and assessment processes, and unclear benefits of inclusion in the Site Network as challenges.
- **What is being explored?** Whether to retain the focus on ecologically important sites, shift towards recognising people and partnerships undertaking conservation at particular places, or combine these approaches.
- **How do IMTAs fit?** Important Marine Turtle Areas identify biologically important habitat through scientific evidence; they are not government-endorsed. The Site Network provides formal recognition endorsed by IOSEA Signatories. A future action-focused network could complement IMTAs by recognising conservation effort rather than reassessing ecological importance.
- **What is being sought now?** Views on purpose, the relationship with IMTAs, the broad model and desired outcomes. These are proposals for discussion – not agreed changes. Detailed criteria, forms and commitments would be considered later.

Three models for discussion

Model	What it would recognise	Main opportunity / issue
1. Ecological Site Network	Sites of ecological significance to marine turtles, with simpler nomination and assessment processes.	Maintains continuity; may overlap with IMTAs and offer limited new incentives to participate.
2. Conservation action and stewardship	People, communities and partnerships undertaking conservation at particular places -for example, management, monitoring, community stewardship or applied research.	Distinguishes the network from IMTAs and could broaden participation; requires new/revised criteria and agreed minimum commitments.

3. Hybrid model	Ecological importance and conservation action through separate categories or pathways; sites could qualify through one or both.	Accommodates different site strengths; could retain duplication with IMTAs and add administrative complexity.

Discussion questions and regional feedback

For the discussion lead: Briefly introduce the context and models. Record areas of agreement, differing views and reasons; consensus is not required.

1. Purpose: What should the primary purpose of the future Site Network be?
Prompt: Recognising important habitat, supporting active conservation and the people involved, connecting practitioners – or a combination?

Regional views:

_____

2. Relationship with IMTAs: Is the proposed distinction clear and useful? Is duplication acceptable?
Prompt: Should Site Network recognition require IMTA status, or also be available elsewhere where meaningful conservation occurs?

Regional views:

_____

3. Future model: Which model should IOSEA pursue, and why?
Prompt: Consider value to Signatories and local practitioners, ease of participation, administrative burden and overlap with IMTAs.

Preferred model(s), reasons and concerns:

_____

4. Success: What should success look like in 5–10 years?
Prompt: Is a vision of hundreds of active, connected sites appropriate? Consider conservation outcomes, useful recognition, participation and knowledge exchange; networking activities would depend on resources.

Priority outcomes and practical constraints:

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