

STAP SCREENING TEMPLATE

GEF ID	12294
Project title	Blue Nature Alliance to advance the high-quality protection of 1.8 billion hectares of ocean ecosystems
Date of screen	22 May 2026
STAP Panel Member	Susanne Schmeier
STAP Secretariat	Geetha Nayak

1. Summary of STAP's views of the project

The project addresses an important environmental challenge by aiming to increase the ocean area protected through effective and well-managed area-based conservation measures. The objectives are well-defined, including clear and measurable indicators, albeit with a rather high number of outcomes/outputs in some components. The objective is ambitious and has the potential to deliver significant GEBs.

Note to STAP screeners: a summary of STAP's view of the project (not of the project itself), covering both strengths and weaknesses.

STAP's assessment*

- ☐ Concur - STAP acknowledges that the concept has scientific and technical merit
- ☒ **Minor - STAP has identified some scientific and technical points to be addressed in project design**
- ☐ Major - STAP has identified significant concerns to be addressed in project design

Please contact the STAP Secretariat if you would like to discuss.

2. Project rationale, and project description – are they sound?

See annex on STAP's screening guidelines.

- The **barriers** are well-described and supported by relevant sources and references, which STAP acknowledges very positively.
- The **Theory of Change** is well described; however, there could be more straightforward linkages made between the barriers to be overcome and the project outcomes and outputs. While the barriers are well described – as are the outcomes and outputs – it is not always clear from the text which activity with which output contributes to which outcome to ultimately meet the project objective; while the Theory of Change figure illustrates this slightly better, there is still room for more clarity and clearer linkages.
- The **objective** is ambitious (with 5% high quality protection rate), which sets a high standard for the project that needs to be carefully and credibly monitored in a transparent manner (how this will be done could be elaborated further as it is not very clear in the PIF).
- **Existing initiatives and projects**, within and beyond GEF, are well described, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the landscape in which the project intends to operate; it does, however, remain a little bit unclear how the project will coordinate within this landscape and engage with the various other initiatives (especially outside of GEF funding) and whether all the other initiatives would indeed accept some sort of coordination function of the proposed project; given that donor coordination and the coordination of non-governmental initiatives in the marine governance space but also more generally remains weak, this should receive more strategic thinking as project development moves ahead.
- **Stakeholders** are also well defined; however, the list of partners, stakeholders, beneficiaries, etc. is very long; some prioritization might be necessary as it is unclear whether the project can meaningfully engage with all those listed in an efficient manner/is not stretching too thinly.
- The PIF states that **institutional arrangements** will be defined in the PPG stage. STAP considers this as too late and would expect some preliminary choices on institutional arrangements already at PIF stage,

especially as the project builds on earlier experiences and is a follow-up activity to earlier work. This is considered a major flaw in the PIF and in the project preparation up to now.

- **Component 1** contains a lot of very different outcomes that are not necessarily related; one could in principle split this into several different components (STAP understands that this might not be possible, but encourages clearer articulation of operational logic). For example, Outcome 1.1 is mostly contributing to the site-level interventions, and Outcome 1.2 shifts to global level capacity development. Similarly, output 1.3 focuses on communicating inspiring stories which could more logically be included in Component 4.
- It also seems that component 1 is equipped with relatively little resources (as a share of overall GEF funding) given the weight of this component in the project and the many different objectives defined.
- Component 1 focuses on improving protection quality and in this context refers to site-specific targets; it would be helpful to define those more clearly, even if site-specific (the criteria listed under output 1.1.1 are still quite generic, maybe examples could help clarify)
- Under **components 2 and 3**, the output 2.1.2 and output 3.1.2 both provide financial and/or technical support to partners to secure designation of new ocean conservation areas in key Ocean geographies and underinvested regions. It would be useful to have clear distinction between the two outputs, especially the scope, and clarify what this support will look like per output.
- Under **component 4**, it is not clear how output 4.3.1 will be achieved in practice, is it expected from improved coordination? And is it the financial and/or technical support provided as part of output 3.1.2 is expected to contribute to this (if so, the link would need to be clarified, including what determines the link/ensures the components are indeed mutually supportive). How will this be measured?
- **Gender** is mentioned rather marginally; while it might be difficult to focus more specifically on gender given the variety of project activity and the different areas of engagement, some more focus on gender would be helpful in order to show that the project does indeed meaningfully engage with gender challenges.
- The project is innovative and the PIF shows how **innovation** will be achieved; it does, however, not show how the project can contribute to transformative change (and it is not clear if this is just not described in the PIF or whether the project did not consider transformative change at all).

3. Specific points to be addressed, and suggestions

- While the Table on **incremental cost reasoning** (Table 3) is welcome and provides a good overview of the underlying assumptions of the project concerning its added value, some of the assumptions are overly simplistic and the differentiation between business as usual and the incremental benefits is somewhat exaggerated which could be simplified. (mainly because the business as usual scenario assumes that there are not other initiatives, ambitions or activities beyond the proposed project, not acknowledging others)
- Within **component 1**, the outputs are not necessarily clearly delineated, which could make future monitoring and reporting challenging; for instance, output 1.1.2 and 1.1.3 could be somewhat overlapping if upgraded levels of protection ultimately lead to high management effectiveness. This needs to be considered when developing the M&E framework, also to ensure there is no double counting.
- **Component 4** includes a relatively high number of outcomes and outputs for a relatively limited scope of work, including the risk of overlap or duplication (with some outputs in component 1 but also within component 4). During the further development of the project, it might be useful to consider more clearly delineating the outcomes and outputs and clarifying which activities fall under which, also with regard to future monitoring.
- The direction of the arrows in **Figure 1** is not entirely clear; for instance, limited resources/funding available is indicated to lead to low political will, however, the other sense of direction seems to make more sense (limited political will leading to insufficient resources/funding), similarly for ocean conservation areas failing to achieve implementation and management is indicated to lead to low

political will, although it is likely the other way around (and similarly for the virtuous cycle part of the figure)

- There seem to be some **headings/subheadings** missing, e.g. for driver 1
- **Formatting** issues in the footnotes could be addressed in future versions of the document.
- The **document is lengthy** at times and has quite some redundancies, e.g., in the description of the Theory of Change.

ANNEX: STAP'S SCREENING GUIDELINES

Project rationale

1. How well does the proposal explain the problem and issues to be addressed in the context of the **system** within which the problem sits and its drivers (e.g. population growth, economic development, climate change, sociocultural and political factors, and technological changes), including how the various components of the system interact?
2. Does the project indicate how **uncertain futures** could unfold (e.g. using simple **narratives**), based on an understanding of the trends and interactions between the key elements of the system and its drivers?
3. Does the project describe the **baseline** problem and how it may evolve in the future in the absence of the project; and then identify the outcomes that the project seeks to achieve, how these outcomes will change the baseline, and what the key **barriers** and **enablers** are to achieving those outcomes?
4. Are the project's **objectives** well formulated and justified in relation to this system context? Is there a convincing explanation as to **why this particular project** has been selected in preference to other options, in the light of how the future may unfold?
5. How well does the **theory of change** provide an "explicit account of how and why the proposed interventions would achieve their intended outcomes and goal, based on outlining a set of key causal pathways arising from the activities and outputs of the interventions and the assumptions underlying these causal connections".
 - Does the project logic show how the project would ensure that expected outcomes are **enduring** and resilient to possible future changes identified in question 2 above, and to the effects of any conflicting policies (see question 9 below).
 - Is the theory of change grounded on a solid scientific foundation, and is it aligned with current scientific knowledge?
 - Does it explicitly consider how any necessary **institutional and behavioral** changes are to be achieved?
 - Does the theory of change diagram convincingly show the overall project logic, including causal pathways and outcomes?
6. Are the project **components** (interventions and activities) identified in the theory of change each described in sufficient detail to discern the main thrust and basis (including scientific) of the proposed solutions, how they address the problem, their justification as a robust solution, and the critical assumptions and risks to achieving them?

7. How likely is the project to generate global environmental benefits which would not have accrued without the GEF project (**additionality**)?
8. Does the project convincingly identify the relevant **stakeholders**, and their anticipated roles and responsibilities? is there an adequate explanation of how stakeholders will contribute to the development and implementation of the project, and how they will benefit from the project to ensure enduring global environmental benefits, e.g. through co-benefits?
9. Does the description adequately explain:
 - How adequate is the project's approach to generating, managing and exchanging **knowledge**, and how will lessons learned be captured for adaptive management and for the benefit of future projects?
- 10. Innovation and transformation:**
 - If the project is intended to be **innovative**: to what degree is it innovative, how will this ambition be achieved, how will barriers and enablers be addressed, and how might scaling be achieved?
 - If the project is intended to be **transformative**: how well do the project's objectives contribute to transformative change, and are they sufficient to contribute to enduring, transformational change at a sufficient scale to deliver a step improvement in one or more GEBs? Is the proposed logic to achieve the goal credible, addressing necessary changes in institutions, social or cultural norms? Are barriers and enablers to scaling be addressed? And how will enduring scaling be achieved?
11. Have **risks** to the project design and implementation been identified appropriately in the risk table in section B, and have suitable mitigation measures been incorporated? (NB: risks to the durability of project outcomes from future changes in drivers should have been reflected in the theory of change and in project design, not in this table.)