



WOMEN OCEAN CHAMPIONS

*Stories of Women Shaping
the EU Blue Economy*

An initiative of the **WIN-BIG Project**
Boosting Women's Inclusion in Blue Economy





Authors & Editors

Mariana Mata-Lara, sustainable Projects (s.Pro)
Helena Vieira, University of Aveiro/CESAM

Contributors

This book features the stories and portraits of 100 women working across the European Blue Economy, representing diverse sectors, sea basins, and professional pathways.

The flag shown under each story represents the country these women work in and not necessarily their nationality.

Coordination & Concept

Mariana Mata-Lara

Planning and Supervision

Helena Vieira

Photography

Individual portraits provided by contributors

Graphic Design & Visual Layout

Fruzsina Foltin, Geonardo Ltd.

Cover & Back Cover

Fruzsina Foltin, Geonardo Ltd.

Production

WIN-BIG Project EMFAF-2022-PIA-WBE, GA 101111985

Publisher

Helena Vieira Editions | Portugal

Edition

First Edition, 2026 (500 printed copies)

Legal Deposit N°

DL 560980/26 deposited in Portuguese National Library

ISBN

978-989-36728-0-8

Recommended Citation

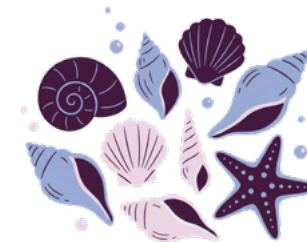
Mata-Lara, M. & Vieira, H. (2026). Women Ocean Champions - Stories of Women Shaping the Blue Economy. 1st Edition 2026. WIN-BIG EU project initiative, Helena Vieira Editions, Portugal. ISBN n° 978-989-36728-0-8



WOMEN OCEAN CHAMPIONS

Stories of Women Shaping the EU Blue Economy

An initiative of the WIN-BIG Project
Boosting Women's Inclusion
in Blue Economy



WIN-BIG project aimed to map the gender status and capacity gaps across EU sea basins and Blue Economy sectors while developing tailored capacity-building tools to make the European blue industry more gender-balanced and sustainable.

Website

<https://winbigproject.eu/>

WIN-BIG Consortium & Project Coordination

Helena Vieira, University of Aveiro/CESAM



Copyright & Licensing

© 2026 WIN-BIG Consortium

All rights reserved unless otherwise stated.

No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior permission, except for non-commercial use with proper attribution.

Image rights remain with the individual contributors and the WIN-BIG Consortium.

Reproduction of portraits requires explicit authorisation.

Funding & Acknowledgement

This publication was developed within the framework of the WIN-BIG Project – Boosting Women’s Inclusion in Blue Economy Sectors, funded by the European Union under the EMFAF programme (EMFAF-2022-PIA-WBE), Grant Agreement No. 101111985.

The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and contributors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Editors' Opening Remarks

Mariana Mata-Lara
Editor



Why Women Ocean Champions

The Blue Economy, which is the one based on the Ocean, touches our lives in more ways than we often realise. It shapes how we source food, generate energy, trade goods, protect ecosystems, and sustain coastal communities. And yet, while the Ocean is shared by all, the opportunities created around it have not been equally accessible to everyone.

This book was born from a simple but pressing question: *Where are the women in the European Blue Economy—and why are so many of their stories still invisible?*

Across Europe, women work every day in marine science, fisheries, ports, shipping, aquaculture, tourism, renewable energy, biotechnology, policy, education, conservation, robotics, and many more ocean-related industries. They lead projects, build companies, run vessels, conduct research, protect ecosystems, teach future generations, and keep coastal communities alive. And despite **women** represent around **45% of the European Blue Economy workforce**, their contributions are still disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid, lower-status, and less visible positions. Leadership roles remain largely **male-dominated**, not because women lack competence or ambition, but because access, opportunity, and recognition have never been fairly and equitably distributed.

This reality is not unique to the Blue Economy, but it is particularly striking in a



sector that claims sustainability as one of its core values. A truly sustainable Blue Economy cannot exist without social balance, fairness, and inclusion. Sustainability is not only about ecosystems and resources; it is also about people.

The **WIN-BIG project** was created to respond to this imbalance. Its mission is not to push anyone out, nor to place women above men, but to ensure that women have the same opportunities to enter, remain, grow, and lead across Blue Economy value chains. WIN-BIG exists because too much talent remains under-represented, because many career paths are harder to access or sustain for women, and because structural barriers still shape who advances and who does not. Change in complex sectors does not happen automatically; it requires awareness, commitment, and coordinated action.

This book is part of that intention.

Women Ocean Champions is not a collection of perfect stories, flawless careers, or linear successes. It is a mosaic of real journeys: messy, courageous, diverse, sometimes quiet, sometimes bold. The women in these pages come from different countries, disciplines, backgrounds, and generations. Some lead companies or institutions; others work behind the scenes. Some always knew they belonged to the sea; others arrived there through unexpected paths. What they share is not a single profession or personality, but persistence, curiosity, resilience, and purpose.

As a woman, I know how powerful it can be to see yourself reflected in someone else's story. To recognise your doubts in their challenges. To find reassurance in their setbacks. To realise that you are not "too late," "not technical enough," "not confident enough," or "not the right profile." Representation matters; not as symbolism, but as permission.

This book is written by women for women who are just starting their careers, for those considering a shift into the Blue Economy, and for those already inside the blue space, who may be questioning their place, pace or next step.

It is also written for men, organisations, policymakers, and leaders as gender balance is not a women's issue; it is a shared responsibility and a collective opportunity.

We do not want to bring anyone down. We want to build a sector where ambition is not limited by gender, where leadership looks different than it used to, and where

diversity is recognised as strength, not an exception. A Blue Economy that reflects the complexity of the Ocean itself: interconnected, adaptive, and alive.

Each story in this book is a reminder that there is no single way to belong to the Blue Economy, and no single definition of success. Together, they show that when women are supported, visible, and empowered, the entire sector benefits.

May these stories inspire you to enter, to stay, to lead, to speak up, to dream bigger—or simply to keep going.

The Ocean is wide enough for all of us.



Editors' Opening Remarks

Helena Vieira

WIN-BIG Coordinator & Co-Editor



Why WIN-BIG and why it matters now?

We all know that the world is not yet fair or inclusive to everyone. **Gender gaps** still persist today, with an age **worldwide gender gap of around 31%**, and an expectancy of **123 years needed before we reach full gender parity worldwide**.

The **WIN-BIG project** was created to respond to this persistent imbalance in the European Blue Economy. While women are present across blue industries and sea basins, their opportunities, visibility, and capacity to influence do not yet reflect their contribution to this thriving economic sector. WIN-BIG brings together **14 partners from 9 countries** across Europe to better understand and map these gaps and to support more inclusive and sustainable pathways in the EU Blue Economy.

At its core, WIN-BIG is guided by a distinction that matters. **Equality** means ensuring the same rights and formal access for everyone. **Equity** recognises that people start from different positions and therefore require different forms of support to reach those same opportunities. **Justice** goes one step further, questioning and transforming the structures and systems that produce inequality in the first place. Advancing gender balance in the Blue Economy requires all three.

During these last 3 years, WIN-BIG has worked relentlessly to **gather gender status knowledge** for the industry and EU decision makers, **fostering data-supported action** plans and strategies towards a more just Blue Economy in Europe. Evidence collected through the WIN-BIG survey and work, across Europe and beyond, confirms that **women represent a substantial share of the EU Blue Economy workforce (42%)**. Yet they remain more exposed to barriers in career progression, leadership, access to training, and safe working environments (**over 31% EU women still suffer harassment**).

These are not individual shortcomings, but systemic patterns. Addressing them is not about “levelling the playing field” in theory, but about reshaping the field itself in practice.

Women Ocean Champions emerged as a **powerful tool** to shape new patterns.

While collecting gender status data, WIN-BIG also acted in **promoting women-centred capacity building** as well as **disseminating gender balance and women’s important roles across the region and Blue Economy sectors**. WIN-BIG developed women-focused events, learning labs and training, and most importantly, an amazing communication strategy using storytelling, real life examples and inspirational women role models to **leverage the attractiveness** of this sector to future blue young girls and women, and **raise the industry profile** across civil society.

This book is one of WIN-BIG’s ways of moving from analysis to experience; from numbers to narratives. It brings together **100 women working in the EU across the diversity of the Blue Economy**, each portrayed within a beautifully designed visual frame inspired by Blue Economy activities, and each sharing a very unique and personal story. These stories speak of commitment and achievement, but also of obstacles, trade-offs, resilience, and learning. Together, they show that gender balance is not achieved by treating everyone the same, but by recognising difference, context, and lived experience and correcting at the base the structural system hurdles that prevent total **gender justice**.

Pop-Up Exhibitions of Women Ocean Champions take the message further

The stories of 30 of these women have also been shared through **pop-up exhibitions** at WIN-BIG events across the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Baltic Sea basins. These exhibitions extend the book’s message into public and professional

spaces, reinforcing visibility and sparking dialogue across communities. Visibility, in this sense, is not symbolic. It is an act of equity and a step toward justice.

As **coordinator of WIN-BIG**, I have seen how powerful it can be when women’s experiences are acknowledged not as exceptions, but as part of the fabric of the Blue Economy. This book does not claim to offer solutions on its own. Instead, it creates space for recognition, for reflection, and for change.

Women Ocean Champions is an invitation. To young women exploring their place in the Blue Economy. To those already within it, navigating its opportunities and constraints. And to organisations, leaders, and policymakers to move beyond formal equality toward equitable and just systems across the Blue Economy.

A truly sustainable Blue Economy depends not only on a healthy Ocean, but on fairness, inclusion, and dignity for the people who work within it. By **amplifying women’s voices** and experiences, this book contributes to that transformation — one story at a time.

The future of the Blue Economy is collective. Women are central to it. And the Ocean and planet will thank us later!



WIN-BIG WOMEN



"Know you are the type of woman who is looking for a place to call yours. Let the statues crumble. You have always been the place. You are a woman who can build it yourself. You were born to build."



Diana Almeida

Science Project Manager at FCCN - Digital Services of The Foundation For Science And Technology

Portugal



Changing Course Without Losing Direction

I may be an example of how the path you set at the beginning of your career doesn't have to be the one you follow forever. From the start, I knew one thing with certainty: I wanted to live by the sea. That became my compass. It guided me through an academic career, then into business, and eventually into science management. I've learned that setting a course matters—but so does allowing yourself to adjust it along the way. Changing fields is scary, but it's often worth it.

One of my first milestones was completing my PhD, a demanding and formative period that shaped how I approach challenges. That experience taught me independence early on. The PhD that followed was the longest and most complex stage of my journey, full of ups and downs, moments of doubt, and feeling trapped at times. What made the difference were the mentors who supported me and helped me understand the value of the people around me.

Another major step was deciding to leave academia and move into business as a project manager. It's a big challenge when you invest so much of yourself in one thing, to reach the end and decide that it's no longer what you want, and that other horizons are calling you. Finding a role that allowed me to return home without abandoning the career path I wanted, felt like closing an important circle.



My Advice

Set your course, put one foot in front of the other, and look around. Look at the sea and say "hi" to your peers. The relationships you build along the way are the most precious thing this career can offer you.

"The secret to doing the impossible is to throw yourself at it with curiosity, courage, and a relentless sense of wonder, start small, keep moving, and celebrate every step, no matter how tiny"



Elisabete da Costa

Scientific and Technology Advisor and Project Manager at BlueBio Alliance

Portugal



Making Space for Impact Beyond the Lab

My journey has never been a straight line. It has been a bridge I built between science, industry, and people. I began in Industrial Chemistry, completed a Master's in Instrumental Analysis, and then a PhD in Sustainable Chemistry, focused on macroalgae and marine lipids as high-added-value bioactive compounds. I loved the science, but I realised knowledge only matters when it moves beyond the laboratory.

Working in industry and research taught me that innovation is often delayed, not because ideas are lacking, but because connections are. Different sectors speak different languages, and too many opportunities are lost because bridging gaps is never straightforward. That is where I found my purpose.

As Advisor and Project Manager at BLUEBIO ALLIANCE, I bring researchers, companies, startups, and stakeholders together to turn marine and aquatic bioresources into technology and sustainable solutions. I support projects as they grow, attract funding, and gain international reach, taking pride in seeing scientific knowledge deliver tangible, real-world impact.

Balancing career, motherhood, and supporting my family through illness tested my resilience, yet strengthened my ability to adapt, learn, and keep building. Beyond professional milestones, I am proud to inspire my daughters and other young women to see challenges as opportunities.



My Advice



*If life gives you waves, learn to surf them.
Stay curious, be bold, and turn obstacles into impact.*

"The sea is not just where I come from; it is what guides the work I do and the future I help build"



Elizabeth Domínguez Chapman

Director of International Projects at Maritime-Marine Cluster of Andalusia

Spain



From Santa Fé to Strategy: A Psychologist Reading the Sea

I was born in Cuba in 1991, in a fishermen's neighbourhood called Santa Fé, where the sea shaped everyday life. It was not a place of abundance, but of strong community ties, imagination, and resilience. The beach was my playground, and the sea taught me early that it could be beauty and danger, refuge and border, sustenance and hope. It was never a holiday destination for me, but a vital daily presence.

I studied Psychology and began my career in the tourism sector, working mostly in coastal environments. I developed psychological profiles, designed visitor experiences, and helped create employment linked to the sea. Without naming it that way, I was already contributing to what we now call the Blue Economy—opportunities rooted in marine and coastal realities.

In 2018, I travelled to Spain and understood the sea was not only part of my past, but essential to my identity. I moved to Málaga for that reason alone. After completing a second master's degree, I entered marine research and began analysing Blue Economy sectors—tourism, ports, and logistics—through data, strategy, and European projects.

That shift wasn't easy. Moving from psychology and tourism into a more technical and policy-oriented space meant learning statistical analysis, sectoral data, and strategic frameworks beyond my previous experience. I faced that challenge through intensive self-learning, teamwork, and a commitment to understanding the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of marine-based sectors. I work to bridge data, policy, and people so Blue Economy initiatives are technically solid, but also human-centred, inclusive, and meaningful for coastal communities.

My Advice

Don't wait to feel fully prepared before stepping into the Blue Economy. Diversity of backgrounds is a strength. Keep learning, trust the value of your experience, and don't be afraid to enter spaces where you are the only woman or come from a different discipline. The Blue Economy needs technical expertise, yes—but it also needs leadership, empathy, and a deep understanding of people and territories. Your perspective matters, and the sector is stronger when women actively shape its future.

"What gives me hope is the courage of people doing whatever it takes to protect our only home, and standing up for all living beings we share this planet with. We must make that courage contagious!"



Farah Obaidullah

Founder and Director of *The Ocean and Us*

The Netherlands



Championing Ocean Protection

I am a long-time Ocean advocate, and founder of *The Ocean and Us* and *Women4Oceans* platform. I have a Master's degree in Environmental Technology and a Bachelor's degree in Biology, both from Imperial College, London. I started my career as an environmental consultant in the private sector. In 2004, I pivoted my career towards my lifelong passion for the Ocean working on issues ranging from overfishing and pollution to protected areas and the threat of deep-sea mining.

Among my proudest achievements is my campaign to stop a destructive fishery from starting in Mauritania. I have worked to expose slavery and labour abuse at sea, and was the first NGO representative to address INTERPOL on these issues. In 2023 I published a book, *The Ocean and Us*, exploring how our lives are connected to the Ocean. The book brings together the expertise of over 35 women ocean specialists.

As a woman with a non-Western name, I have faced my share of challenges. I have been paid less than colleagues for the same work, had my name removed from press releases as it was deemed "too complicated," and even had my campaign handed to a male colleague for better PR. Despite these obstacles, I have never let discrimination deter me. My belief in what I do, combined with my passion for the Ocean, has kept me moving forward.



My Advice

Be you. Never change who you fundamentally are and work to be the best version of you. By staying true to yourself and your interests, you are already successful.

“Dream Big”



Hasmik Grigoryan

Post-Doctoral Researcher at DCU Business School

Ireland



Tackling Inequality through Data and Partnerships

I worked as a trainer in the project funded by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. The programme involved military, police, and civilian peacekeeping personnel (including naval services and water police). The goal was to assist the organizations in their transformation towards a more inclusive environment that would be friendly and equal. Organisations linked with the sea that deal with security challenges as well as require technology skills are traditionally occupied by men and require reforms to be able to increase the number of females. The project not only brought together male and female representatives working on issues such as gender inequalities, patrolling, and stabilisation of tensions, but also facilitated partnerships among the representatives from the EU Member States and countries across Asia and Latin America.

After this, I transitioned into the Blue Economy sector, working in consulting where I designed projects to increase the resilience of coastal communities in the Caribbean. These projects addressed climate risks such as sea-level rise and heavy precipitation. I also researched gender issues in island countries, focusing on domestic violence and increasing security. One of my projects involved gathering data on transportation challenges in conflict-affected countries, particularly regarding sea and land trade.

Currently, as part of the EU-funded WIN-BIG project, I research gender inequalities in the Blue Economy. There is a significant gap in gender-disaggregated data on the role of women in the sector. My team and I are working to collect both existing and new data to increase awareness and inform decision-makers about the ongoing challenges women face in the EU Blue Economy sector.

Although my career in the Blue Economy began only recently, I have quickly adapted and gained a deep understanding of the sector. Overcoming the challenge of entering a new field, especially coming from a landlocked country like Armenia, I've been able to expand my knowledge by working closely with colleagues in sea-bordering countries, learning from their expertise, and building my own.

My Advice

There are various stereotypes that exist in the Blue Economy. I think career choice is based on rationality, but at the same time, I would advise gathering accurate information and choosing a path that genuinely aligns with their career aspirations. Once you are involved in an area that really interests you, you can further build your skills through training and cooperation.

"Progress happens when we choose to build the future we believe in. Do not wait for permission to do so!"



Helena Vieira

*Coordinator Senior Researcher at
University of Aveiro/Mission Ocean Board Member*

Portugal



Connecting Knowledge to Action: Leading Transformation in the Blue Economy

My journey in the EU Blue Economy is a 25-year testament to the power of bridging science, entrepreneurship and public policy. Trained as a biomedical scientist, with a PhD from Imperial College London and executive education at Harvard Business School, I early understood that scientific excellence only creates real value when it is translated into solutions for society and the planet.

That conviction led me to pioneer marine biotechnology start-ups in Portugal as co-founder and CEO of BIOALVO, the country's first marine biotech company. We helped mobilise over €25 million and proved that marine genetic resources can become real, market-ready innovations. But my ambition extended beyond the boardroom. As Director-General for Maritime Policy, I co-led the design of Portugal's National Ocean Strategy 2021–2030, aligning it with European priorities and the UN Ocean Decade.

Today, as a Senior Researcher and ERA Chair at the University of Aveiro, and as a member of the EU Mission Ocean Board, I lead interdisciplinary teams connecting natural and socioeconomic sciences to deliver impact-driven solutions for (blue)sustainability. I've spoken at more than 650 international events and contributed to mobilising sel projects and over €35 million for applied research and innovation. Through WIN-BIG, which I coordinate, recognised with the 2025 Atlantic Award for Blue Skills, I work to turn gender equality into measurable progress.

The path hasn't been simple: translating frontier science into impact meant working in spaces where markets and frameworks were still immature; leadership as a woman in traditionally male-dominated sectors meant credibility had to be earned; and moving between entrepreneurship, government, and academia demanded resilience across different tempos and expectations. Those challenges strengthened a core belief: transformation requires opening doors—and holding them open.

My Advice

Invest deeply in your expertise and don't wait for permission to lead.

"I am capable of achieving my goals, I am worthy of love and happiness, and I embrace change"



Laurence Martin

Secretary General of the Italian Maritime Cluster

Italy



35 Years at Sea Tables: From Few Women to Real Change

After 35 years working across both the public and private sectors—at Transport Canada, the European Commission, and the Italian Shipowners' Association—my career has been shaped by one constant: people connected to the sea. I've shared inspiring discussions, lived unforgettable moments, and learned how much the maritime world depends on commitment, cooperation, and long-term thinking.

When I started, there were only a few women around the table. Today, there are more—and I'm proud to have witnessed that shift. Working in a male-dominated environment was not always easy, but I learned that professional behaviour, self-confidence, and keeping control in difficult moments make a real difference. What carried me forward was passion for what I did every day, resilience, and a firm iron will to keep going.

To me, the Blue Economy is more than a model for growth: it is an innovative way of approaching the sea as a key element for climate regulation, biodiversity conservation, and social cohesion.



My Advice

My advice would be that if you feel drawn to this field, step in with purpose—because contributing to the well-being of people and planet is a privilege".

"Your passion is waiting for your courage to catch up."



Mariana Mata Lara

Senior Project Manager at SUBMARINER Network

Portugal



Opening My Own Path to the Sea: Following Passion Across Coasts and Continents

I was born in a country with over 11,000 km of coastline, yet I grew up in a landlocked megacity. Still, the Ocean was always in my life—I first visited it when I was two weeks old, and returned several times a year throughout childhood. After high school I felt pulled in every direction, so I asked a different question: what is my passion? The answer was clear: I wanted to be close to the sea. That led me to study Sustainable Management of Coastal Zones and to move from a city of 20 million people to a fishing village of 1,000, where mangroves, flamingos and the Ocean became my everyday classroom. Studying coastal systems while living them, building friendships with fishers, and understanding daily life by the sea shaped my path deeply.

Conferences became my window into the wider marine world, and one conversation opened the door to volunteering at Cocos Island, Costa Rica, a hammerhead shark hotspot, where I experienced marine protected areas firsthand. Other opportunities followed, like a full scholarship for a 'Semester at Sea'—five weeks crossing the Sargasso Sea, studying biodiversity, policy and maritime heritage, disconnected from the world, one of the most challenging and beautiful experiences of my life. Mid-voyage I learned I'd been accepted, fully funded, to a Master's in Environmental Policy in Europe, which took me across Hungary, Greece, England and the U.S., shaping my thesis again on the success factors in Marine Protected Areas.

I returned to Mexico to work on coral research in the Caribbean, but later on I realised I needed to work on more tangible impact, so I moved back to Hungary to focus on coastal project management and eventually to Portugal, where I now work remotely for an organisation focused entirely on Ocean Projects—going deep into marine conservation and supporting women to open their own paths in the Blue Economy. Along my pathway, financial barriers were my biggest challenge, so my proudest achievement is carving the road I wanted to walk: knocking on doors, not fearing change, and having fresh starts again and again.

My Advice

Always, always, listen to yourself. When you follow what comes from your heart, obstacles can become opportunities—and your passion will lead you where you want to be.

"May the virtues of the greatest among us serve as guidance and inspiration for all."



Rita Gomes Baptista

Communication and Marketing Manager at BlueBio Alliance

Portugal



Turning Marine Science Into Language People Can Use

The sea shaped my curiosity early on, and I always knew I wanted to study Marine Biology. After my degree, I worked in educational services while completing a Master's in Ethology, and I discovered something transformative: my passion wasn't only understanding nature, but translating complex science into language people can use. I specialised in plain language and inclusive design, and later on completed a Master's in Science Communication, bringing together my two passions: the Ocean and literacy.

A proud achievement has been developing inclusive educational visits for visually impaired and blind audiences. With ACAPO (the Portuguese Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted) and the Portuguese Federation of Deaf Associations' support, I co-created adapted materials and experiences so marine science content could be accessed by all. Co-designing with communities confirmed a principle I hold tightly: inclusion must be built in from the outset, never added later.

Another milestone was representing blue bioeconomy start-ups at the Portugal Pavilion during Expo 2025 in Osaka. Communicating marine-based solutions to a global audience was an honour, and it pushed me to be sensitive, adaptable, and learn Japanese terms to connect with visitors.

I've also had to challenge the assumption that science communication doesn't require expertise. When strategic advice is questioned, you learn to stand your ground, so I invested in specialised training to advocate for evidence-based approaches that build understanding, trust, and engagement.

My Advice

Allow yourself moments to pause. Let the Ocean give you perspective and strength. Trust your knowledge, invest in your skills, and support other women—persistence shapes landscapes over time.

THE ATLANTIC OCEAN



"Everything will be alright in the end, if it's not alright it's not the end."



Andreia Afonso

Portuguese Task Group for the Extension of the Continental Shelf

Portugal



Empowering the Next Generation with ROV Technology and Ocean Exploration

The most inspiring thing to me has been so far having the opportunity to meet inspirational humans, especially women who have also inspired me. My connection to the world of technology began unexpectedly, during my oceanography course. While I didn't know exactly where it would lead, I always knew I wanted a hands-on, technical career connected to the sea. My path took me to the Portuguese Task Group for the Extension of the Continental Shelf (EMEPC), where I first encountered the world of remotely operated vehicles (ROVs). In 2008, I had the chance to participate in my first oceanographic campaign off the Azores and Mid-Atlantic Ridge, piloting the ROV Luso, a submersible capable of diving 6,000 meters deep. This experience sparked my passion for ROVs, and today, I co-lead a team of pilots, ensuring the ROV's full operationality.

Our work involves everything from performing maintenance and repairing hydraulic systems to integrating new sensors, always aligned with scientific objectives. Early in my career, the ROV world was heavily male-dominated, coming from the oil and gas industry, but as we transitioned to using ROVs for scientific purposes, the gender barrier slowly faded. I feel fortunate to be part of a team that embraces gender diversity as an asset, and I'm proud of the progress we've made.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my career has been engaging with younger audiences through projects like "Escola Azul," where we show students the wonders of ROV technology. I've worked with students to solve real-world problems, such as building a guillotine to cut cables on the seabed—a challenge that tested our technology and knowledge transfer abilities. The joy in seeing their work integrated into our ROV was an unforgettable moment, and it reminded me why I'm passionate about inspiring the next generation of scientists and engineers.

My Advice

Fighting biases, ending stigmas, deconstructing stereotypes and changing the paradigm is fighting for a fairer and equitable society. Therefore, you can become whoever you want to be, without pre-conceived ideas and shackles that could narrow your horizon. Be confident and advocate for yourself to be part of the change.

*"I never lose.
I either win or learn"*
Nelson Mandela



Ana Brito e Melo

Chief Operating Officer at WavEC

Portugal



From Azores Roots to Global Leadership in Marine Renewables

I grew up on the island of Faial in the Azores, always aware of the Ocean's vast power. It was during my civil engineering studies that I realised the Ocean's energy could be harnessed to generate electricity, and that's when I found my purpose in marine renewable energy. Since 1993, I've worked in this field, diving into wave energy during my PhD, where I explored how to design a wave power plant from conceptual studies to real-world deployment.

Through my work with the International Energy Agency - Ocean Energy Systems (IEA-OES) since 2002, I've learned from and collaborated with incredible people worldwide. This global network deepened my belief in international collaboration and the value of shared knowledge. Teamwork is at the core of everything I do. I consider myself an inspirational example not for having all the answers but for my resilience in a sector where progress can be slow and full of challenges. I've remained committed, continuously learning and adapting to keep pushing forward. I believe that persistence, even when progress is gradual, is key to achieving long-term impact. My journey reflects the reality of innovation: it takes time, patience, and the determination to keep going despite obstacles.

One of my challenges is that I often hesitate to speak up despite realising that expertise without visibility limits impact. I usually prefer working behind the scenes as I feel more comfortable working quietly and creating space for others to move things forward. However, I need to challenge myself to voice out, represent my work publicly, and take leadership when needed. It is not always easy, but I have learned that you can lead in your own way with authenticity and quiet confidence. Making that ongoing effort - stepping forward even when it feels uncomfortable - has helped me grow and contribute to the causes I care about.

My Advice

Don't wait for the perfect moment to lead—just begin, even if quietly. The Blue Economy needs your perspective. Seek mentors, put purpose above personal gains, and uplift others along the way.

"Was it worth it? Everything is worth it if the soul isn't small! (...) God gave the sea its danger and abyss. But it is in it that He reflected the sky."
Fernando Pessoa



Ana Laura Pinto

Business Development Manager Tethys Robotics

Switzerland



Inheriting the Connection to the Ocean

I grew up by the sea, holding my grandfather's hand—he was a port engineer who dedicated his life to ports and saving lives. From a young age, I visited container terminals and fishing ports, learning to admire the Ocean for its power, danger, and necessity. Saltwater runs in my veins.

I began my career designing hydraulic systems and dams, contributing to key infrastructure projects like the Lisbon Cruise Terminal and the expansion of container ports, always with the Ocean at the centre. At the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA), I helped implement sulphur emission directives and create digital tools for port state control. That mission remains close to my heart — a time when policy, purpose, and innovation aligned for cleaner seas.

In Figueira da Foz and Aveiro, I connected with the fishing sector, listening to the concerns of those who live by the sea. Now, at Tethys Robotics, I'm advancing underwater technology to reduce pollution, improve safety, and protect marine ecosystems.

Throughout my journey, I had to prove my expertise twice as hard to be taken seriously—on construction sites, in boardrooms, and at the decision-making tables. I overcame this by delivering results, building trust with teams, and never compromising on integrity. Respect followed persistence. The Blue Economy is my legacy. I'm here to honour the past and shape the future, one wave, one project, and one purpose at a time.



My Advice

Build deep technical knowledge, never stop learning, and be ready to adapt. Seek out mentors and allies who believe in you, and support other women on their paths. Most importantly, stay connected to your passion and purpose - walk by the sea, talk with the sea, feel its answer.

"Fear is a natural part of the journey. Embrace it, but never let it hold you back."



Ana Paula Mucha

Principal Researcher - Group Leader at Interdisciplinary Centre of Marine and Environmental Research (CIIMAR)

Portugal



Bioremediation for Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration

From a young age, I was captivated by the mysteries of the Ocean and its ecosystems, a passion that guided my academic journey. I earned a degree in Aquatic Sciences, followed by an MSc in Ecology, Management and Modelling of Aquatic Resources, and a PhD in Aquatic Sciences. Throughout my career, I have focused on advancing our understanding of aquatic ecosystems and developing sustainable solutions for environmental challenges. As a researcher at CIIMAR, University of Porto, I lead the Bioremediation and Microbes for Sustainability team, pioneering innovative bioremediation technologies to restore aquatic environments.

In addition to my research, I am committed to mentorship as an Invited Assistant Professor, guiding MSc and PhD students at the University of Porto. Through my involvement in various national and international projects, I have contributed to groundbreaking research in environmental sustainability. I am proud to be part of initiatives like "Ocean3R," "BIOREM," and "SpilLess," which focus on reducing environmental pressures and using native microorganisms for bioremediation.

However, securing funding for innovative research has been a significant challenge. By building strong collaborations with national and international partners, I have successfully led multiple funded projects. Balancing research and mentorship is another ongoing challenge, but my dedication to fostering the next generation of scientists remains my priority. This balance has allowed me to maintain high standards in both my research and my role as an educator, helping shape the future of aquatic sciences.

My Advice

A strong academic foundation opens doors to numerous opportunities, but there's no single path to success. Collaboration is essential. Surround yourself with supportive individuals who inspire and challenge you to grow.

"Small actions multiplied by many can change the world."



Andreia Coutinho
CMO & Co-Founder of SKIZO



Portugal



Transforming Ocean Waste into Fashion

SKIZO was born out of a clear purpose: to turn ocean waste into valuable resources, proving that sustainability and innovation can go hand in hand. When André and I started this journey, we knew we wanted to make an impact—not just on the environment but on how people perceive fashion and the circular economy. Our breakthrough came when we pioneered the use of recycled plastic from ocean waste, including abandoned fishing nets and marine debris, to create sustainable textiles and high-value products like sneakers and bags.

Our work extends beyond environmental impact—we've integrated social responsibility by collaborating with local communities and exploring innovative inclusion programs. From engaging younger generations to supporting prisoners and providing opportunities for personal transformation, we've shown how the Blue Economy can foster economic empowerment while protecting marine ecosystems.

The road wasn't always smooth. Convincing people about the value of ocean waste was challenging, but through research and innovation, we proved that recycled materials can be high-quality and durable. Establishing a sustainable supply chain was another hurdle, but we worked closely with local fishing communities and NGOs, building strong partnerships. Balancing financial viability with sustainability goals was also tough, but we reinvested profits into growth, ensuring that our mission to create a cleaner world stays on track.

My Advice



Remember, even small steps can lead to big results. Don't wait for everything to be perfect before you act as success often comes from persence and adaptability. Focus on progress and the positive impact you're making—every contribution matters in creating a better future.

"Inaction breeds fear and doubt. Action breeds confidence and courage."



Anna Canning

Founder & CEO of Atrium Environmental

Germany



From Self-Doubt to a Holistic Vision for the Blue Economy

I founded my company to challenge how the marine industry approaches sustainability—bringing in a more holistic, collaborative vision for the future. My journey has been anything but easy, full of moments of self-doubt and questioning. But my drive to create positive change has always pushed me forward.

My career path wasn't a straight line. I worked in various jobs from waitressing to sales, and my academic record wasn't perfect. However, I had curiosity, resilience, and determination to keep learning. Eventually, I found my way into marine conservation and completed a PhD—not because it was easy, but because I wanted to prove to myself that I could. But what matters more is that I never stopped moving forward, even when I felt out of place.

I've faced many challenges: personal doubts, criticism, financial struggles, mistakes, and sexism. At times, I was underestimated and had to work harder to be heard. The biggest challenge was myself—learning to accept who I am, how I work, and being true to my future self. But none of this growth would have been possible without the support of the people who helped me along the way.

Success, I've learned, isn't about following a prescribed path. It's about staying true to your values, being kind to yourself when things don't go as planned, and having the courage to start over. In the Blue Economy, there is no single path, and your journey is valuable, even if it's messy, even if it changes direction—because the world needs all kinds of people to drive change. Authenticity is part of what makes that possible.

My Advice

Your journey is uniquely yours. If people criticise, doubt, or try to hold you back, remember - their opinions are not a reflection of your worth or potential. Stay focused on where you want to go, let your passion guide you, and be open to constructive advice, but ultimately, live your own story and let others live theirs.

"The future lies in sustainable creativity."



Antonieta da Ponte Rocha

CEO of Nieta Atelier

Portugal



Reimagining Marine Waste: Designing Sustainable Solutions for Land and Sea

For over a decade, the sea and land have been my greatest sources of inspiration, fuelling my mission to create sustainable solutions for both. Growing up in the Azores, an archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic, I developed a deep connection to the Ocean. Despite the beauty of the islands, we cannot ignore the threat of marine litter, a growing global problem that requires more than waste collection—it demands a shift in how we educate and engage communities.

With a background in Architecture, I saw the potential in transforming marine waste into valuable resources, particularly for use in construction and design. I believe that by reimagining sea litter as raw material, we can create sustainable solutions that benefit both the environment and urban development. This vision was realised through my leadership of the Azores Ecoblue project, which promotes innovative solutions for marine conservation and brings together top experts in the field. I've also contributed to scientific publications on marine biotechnology and Ocean sustainability, furthering research that supports our oceans.

However, my work has not come without challenges. Leading large, international teams of over 30 specialists in scientific research on marine and terrestrial environments has been both a privilege and a major challenge. Balancing the demands of such complex projects requires constant innovation, collaboration, and a deep commitment to the preservation of our planet. I remain determined to continue advancing sustainability through creativity, partnerships, and science.



My Advice

Life is an unpredictable ocean—stay steady and confident in the storm, and just as grounded in calm waters so you don't lose your direction. Dream big like the sea, and let your family be the safe harbour that restores your strength when the winds change.

"My purpose is to be a bridge - between people and the Ocean, between conflict and cooperation, and between what we have today and the healthier ocean we need tomorrow."



Débora Gutierrez

Researcher at University of the Azores

Portugal



Where Science Meets Community: Lasting Conservation by Lifting Local Voices

For more than 15 years, my professional journey has been guided by a deep commitment to ocean conservation, coastal governance, and community-focused environmental stewardship. I've worked in Marine Protected Areas and coastal environments where protecting ecosystems is never only about science or policy—it's about people, trust, and how decisions are made.

In Brazil, I managed protected areas at different scales and realities. As a manager at Anchieta Island State Park, I led a 40-person team, strengthened operational strategies, helped secure resources, and represented the institution across regional and international spaces. In Fernando de Noronha and in Soure—within the Marine Extractive Reserve in the Amazon—I worked closely with traditional communities, designing participatory processes, environmental education programmes, and socio-environmental initiatives in highly sensitive coastal areas. These experiences shaped one of my strongest beliefs: lasting conservation only happens when local voices genuinely guide the process.

Since 2021, as a researcher at the University of the Azores, I've contributed to five European-funded projects in the Macaronesia region, expanding my work into international ocean governance, marine spatial planning, and science-based decision-making—while continuing my academic path, including my ongoing PhD.

My story is one of resilience, collaboration, and dedication. I strive every day to balance human needs with the protection of marine ecosystems, working for an Ocean that is healthy, inclusive, and governed with transparency. This lifelong commitment to people, science, and the sea is what makes my journey inspirational but also demanding.

My Advice

Cultivate confidence in your voice and your expertise, even in spaces where you may be the minority. Seek opportunities to lead and do it through collaboration and community-centred approaches, keep learning, and pair technical skills with empathy, adaptability, and integrity to create lasting impact.

"No calm sea ever made a sailor skilled: listen, take a deep breath, and keep rowing."



Elisa Romero

Environmental and EU Project Manager Officer at Port of Vigo

Spain



Bridging Science, Ports, and Coastal Communities

My story with the sea begins inland, in an environmental biotechnology lab, researching organic matter recycling. The first project I worked on would be called today a circular economy one: valorising algae through composting. From there, I spent years in teaching, environmental management, and training—work linked to what was then called Blue Growth.

That path brought me close to coastal communities whose livelihoods depend directly on the sea, and my role gradually became a bridge between science, territory, and society. Leading and presenting my first project was a turning point: it confirmed this was where I wanted to contribute. The project focused on seaweed valorisation in shellfish harvesting areas and received the Galician Blue Economy Award for Local Innovation. After its second phase, it was recognised as an EU best practice in Community-Led Local Development.

As a woman, I also faced challenges that weren't technical: paternalistic attitudes that questioned the expertise of "that bird," invisible power dynamics that tried to weaken my voice, and the constant need to prove my competence. I answered with persistence, technical rigour, and clear communication—building trust and delivering solutions step by step, grounded in the strength of the women in my family.

Years later, I joined the port industry, a traditionally male-dominated environment. It gave me the chance to work on projects shaping the future of ports as Blue Economy hubs, and to promote ocean literacy among younger generations through Blue Schools.

My Advice

The Blue Economy needs diverse perspectives, and your voice is part of the horizon we're building together. Many barriers are cultural, not personal—so keep listening, cooperating, and moving forward, even when the headwinds are strong.

"Be stubborn in what you want, other people will try and sway you. Stand your ground"



Grace Lynch

Project Facilitator at H2 Learning

Ireland



From Oyster Farms to Classrooms: Championing Marine Education and Aquaculture Sustainability

I work as a project facilitator with Bord Iascaigh Mhara on a remote classroom that travels to coastal communities, teaching 11 and 12-year-olds about marine biology and aquaculture. My role brings together subjects like the history of farming, aquaculture, geography and climate, people's jobs, health and nutrition, and sustainability, all aligning with the Irish curriculum. It's my dream job combining my love for the Ocean with my passion for teaching. I've seen firsthand the value of aquaculture, having worked on an oyster farm, and I'm proud to spread the word about its importance—especially from a sustainability standpoint. With the World Health Organization predicting a need for 70% more food sources to feed the world's population by 2050, I believe aquaculture will play a crucial role.

A key achievement for me was welcoming EU Commissioner Costas Kadis and Ireland's Minister of State for Fisheries and Marine, Timmy Dooley, to our Aquaculture Remote Classroom during the European Maritime Conference in Cork City. On a personal level, I'm proud of my time working on an oyster farm—traditionally a male-dominated field. I was the only girl on the farm at the time, but being there, demanding respect, and proving myself alongside the guys built my confidence tremendously.

The main challenge I have faced was keeping myself from listening to others. People tried to dissuade me from taking marine science as a college degree, as they thought there wouldn't be any jobs in the field. But I held true to myself and I am more than happy with the work I do on a day-to-day basis.

My Advice

Be open to everything. Say yes to every opportunity.
If you're nervous that's how you know you're on the right track

*“Do what you love,
love what you do.”*



Helena Abreu

Freelance consultant, International Seaweed Association (Council Member), Global Seaweed Coalition (Strategic Advisory Council)

Portugal



Value Chains Through Seaweed Innovation

Growing up and living by the Ocean and the coastal lagoon of Aveiro, in constant contact with the sun and wind, shaped both my personal and professional path. My interest in seaweed began during my Marine Biology studies in the Azores. While scuba diving, I discovered this often-overlooked world, with its rich diversity of colours, sizes and shapes. What started as curiosity soon became a lasting passion—fuelled by mentors whose dedication to seaweed as a unique marine resource continues to inspire and guide me.

In 2011, I co-founded ALGAplus to cultivate seaweed using the Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture concept, supplying it to the food, cosmetics, and other sectors. We combined scientific expertise with local aquaculture and seafood processing knowledge to develop a sustainable and innovative production model. Building the business came with many challenges—bureaucratic hurdles, limited funding, and widespread scepticism about the potential for seaweed cultivation in Europe. I also faced investor bias and periods of burnout; but resilience, emotional intelligence, and strong partnerships enabled me to move forward.

With over two decades of experience, I now work as an independent consultant, supporting project and business development, R&D strategy, and building connections between people and organisations across the seaweed and broader Blue Bioeconomy sectors. Collaboration and active participation in associations are central to my mission: to advance sustainable seaweed production, strengthen inclusive and resilient value chains, and promote the growing role of marine resources in supporting people, the planet, and coastal communities.

My Advice

Surround yourself with knowledgeable and good humans that can complement your skills. Then, with passion and hard work, everything is possible!

“Everything is happening perfectly.”



Karen May

Chief Financial Officer of XOCEAN

Ireland



Revolutionising Ocean Data

As a founding member and CFO of XOCEAN, I am proud to drive change in the Blue Economy by transforming how ocean data is collected—making it safer, more sustainable, and more accessible. With over two decades of experience in renewable energy and marine innovation, I have helped scale XOCEAN from a startup to a company with 300 employees and operations in 23 countries. We recently closed a €115m funding round with world-leading financial institutions. Our use of uncrewed robotic vessels is reducing the environmental impact of marine operations while supporting the global shift toward clean, data-driven decision-making.

One of the key achievements in my journey has been building an incredible team that has worked seamlessly to scale the business. Our Uncrewed Surface Vessels (USVs) have revolutionised ocean data delivery. Our game-changing technology and innovative working practices are delivering trusted, actionable data to the world's largest renewable energy companies. To date we have supported the production of 43.1GW of new offshore wind capacity, contributing to cleaner energy and a more sustainable future.

As a woman in a senior leadership role in a traditionally male-dominated sector, I understand the importance of visibility and advocacy. I actively engage in public speaking at EU, EIB, and national events to inspire others. In 2024, I was honoured as CFO of the Year, Woman of the Year, and STEM Professional of the Year. Every platform is an opportunity to encourage more women to lead with vision, empathy, and ambition in the Blue Economy.

One of the greatest challenges we faced was scaling the business fast enough to meet demand. It has been immensely rewarding, and I am proud of the positive team culture we've built.

My Advice

My advice is that it's hugely rewarding and motivating to work in a role that positively impacts both current lives and future generations. Every small action can make a difference.

“Start where you are.
Use what you have.
Do what you can.”



Júlia Cavaz
Manager of Horta da Ria

Portugal



Restoring Salt Marshes and Reconnecting People with Sustainable Food

Until 2020, I worked in telecommunications, but I decided to change my life and follow my passion. I started working with my company, Horta da Ria, where I focus on restoring old, abandoned salt marshes. Working outdoors, improving the environment, and promoting human health through the cultivation of *Salicornia*, a native plant of salt marshes, has been an incredibly rewarding experience. This plant not only restores ecosystems but also offers a nutritious, sustainable food source.

In 2020, our company won the Blue Bio Value award, a recognition that affirmed the potential of our work in the Blue Economy. We also participate in various conferences, sharing our experiences and insights about how Blue Bioeconomy practices can drive both environmental and social change.

However, there have been challenges along the way. Many people are unfamiliar with *Salicornia* and its health benefits, and convincing them to change their eating habits can be difficult. Additionally, investing in the recovery of salt marshes is a complex and costly process, often requiring a long-term commitment. Despite these challenges, I remain committed to our mission, believing that small, persistent efforts can create lasting impact.



My Advice

Be curious, patient, resilient and never stop dreaming.

»If they don't give you
a seat at the table,
bring a folding chair»
Shirley Chisholm.



Laura Alonso García

R&D Project Manager at CT Engineering Group

Spain



Engineering Space Where None Was Given

I am a naval architect driven by a deep passion for the sea, ships, and engineering. My career began as an Integrated Logistics Support (ILS) engineer, working on projects for the Spanish Navy and the Royal Australian Navy. Over time, I expanded into R&D&I project management, focusing on innovation in sustainability — from plastics detention in river flows to zero-emission vessels.

One of my proudest achievements is managing the REPERA project (Retrieving Plastic Ebb from Rivers Autonomously), awarded at the ABB Ability Awards 2024 and included in the European Commission's Mission Ocean and Waters Actions list. I have also managed Erasmus+ Blue Economy initiatives such as MATES and GREEN VET Network, and led H2TECH4SHIP, a project designing a zero-emission tugboat powered by green hydrogen and batteries.

Alongside engineering, I actively promote female representation in maritime and STEAM fields through AMIT-Gal and EVA (Ellas Vuelan Alto), working to highlight women's roles in science and shipbuilding.

Throughout my journey, I've faced challenges, including being questioned about my opportunities due to my gender and having to repeatedly explain my role in a male-dominated industry. I overcame these obstacles by persistently asking for opportunities, ignoring comments, and consciously carving out my space in the naval and shipbuilding sector. Despite feeling like I didn't belong at times, I overcame that feeling by consciously choosing to stay in my sector and occupy the space is mine.

My Advice

Never give up. Keep trying. Even when the world seems to be pushing you outside the blue world, stay.



"The Ocean are a great laboratory for the making of a new world order, based on new forms of international co-operation (...), on a new economic model, on a new philosophy."

Elisabeth Mann Borgese



Luz Paramio

President of EurOcean /Directive Board Member of the Regional Science and Technology Fund

Portugal



From Inland Curiosity to Island Leadership

Since childhood, I've always felt a deep instinct to search for answers in the Ocean, visualizing its infinite horizon and the freedom I feel when diving into saltwater during the most challenging moments of my life. This connection led me to leave my inland home for the islands, where I studied oceanography to understand the Ocean's complexity and its planetary-like functionality. Through the Erasmus programme, I moved to the Azores, where I discovered the human dimension of the Ocean through the concept of Azority and the region's maritime cultural heritage.

Throughout my career, I've worked to recognise the Ocean's value beyond its economic aspects, focusing on Ocean Governance and sustainability. My goal has always been to explore how we can sustainably manage and preserve the Ocean for future generations. I currently serve as President of EurOcean, a Directive Board Member in Science & Innovation, and the coordinator of several European projects focused on ocean sustainability.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was the need to constantly demonstrate my worth in a field that still presents gender and nationality disparities, something I didn't fully realise when I was younger. It's been a rough sea to navigate, especially as women often face barriers in decision-making spheres, whether political, academic, or community-based. Nevertheless, I believe our work in the Blue Economy is vital for future generations, and it motivates me to continue striving for change and equality within the sector.

My Advice

My advice to other women is to go ahead, prepare yourself with strong knowledge, develop your skills, and trust your instincts to allow innovation to arise. And of course, take care of the Ocean!

"Resilience is growing stronger through challenges -and like coral reefs, we thrive when we work together, supporting both people and the planet."



Margaux Monfared

International Policy and Advocacy Director at Blue Pangolin

United Kingdom



Empowering Change for Coral Reefs and Gender Equity in Conservation

My career has been driven by a deep passion for coral reefs and their vital role in ocean health. From restoring reefs in the Maldives to shaping international biodiversity frameworks, I've worked across science, policy, and community engagement to connect local action with global ambition.

Through Blue Pangolin Consulting and the International Coral Reef Initiative, I've helped ensure coral reefs are prioritised in climate, biodiversity, and Blue Economy policies. Supporting over a billion people globally, reefs face growing pressures, and their protection is more urgent than ever.

In 2024, I joined the 'Leading Women for the Ocean' and the advisory board of the Coral Restoration Consortium. I've led key policy initiatives, including the development of the Key Policy Asks for Coral Reefs and the first IUCN Motion on coral bleaching. I also supported Fiji in shaping and negotiating the UNEA-7 resolution on promoting the climate resilience of coral reefs, providing technical and policy expertise to ensure it was grounded in the latest science and responsive to the needs of reef-dependent communities.

Challenges in my career have included bridging the gap between science and policy in resource-limited settings and addressing the underrepresentation of women in ocean governance. I've focused on building inclusive partnerships and elevating underrepresented voices.

My Advice

My advice to women aspiring to succeed in the Blue Economy is to embrace your unique perspective and let your voice be heard. This field needs diverse leadership and fresh ideas to tackle complex challenges like sustainable ocean management. Collaboration is key, so invest in relationships across sectors. Keep learning and stay curious, as science and policy are constantly evolving. I am still young and learning and have found this is what has supported me so far!

"For every problem we face on land, there lies a solution in the sea - we need only to overcome our sea blindness to discover it."



Máire Éinniú

Head of Nua Mara, Ireland's Marine Innovation Centre

Ireland



Transforming Traditional Industries: Strategic Leadership in Marine Development

As a woman leading strategic marine development projects in Ireland, I've dedicated my career to sustainable ocean innovation, bridging economic advancement with environmental stewardship. My journey from accounting to becoming a key figure in Ireland's Blue Economy demonstrates how diverse skills can create meaningful impact. I recognised the opportunity to apply my financial background to marine resource management, an area vital to Ireland's future yet often lacking strategic frameworks.

My work with Páirc na Mara and the Ros an Mhil represents my commitment to creating sustainable employment in Gaeltacht regions. Serving as Company Secretary for Comharchumann Sliogéisc Chonamara Teo., one of Europe's largest aquaculture co-operative, I've demonstrated how strategic thinking can transform traditional industries, balancing commercial viability with environmental stewardship.

I've always believed in continuous learning. After establishing my financial credentials, I pursued an M.Econ.Sc. in Natural Resource Economics, which has informed my work. My master's thesis on public attitudes toward marine activities underscores my dedication to understanding the economic and social dimensions of coastal development.

However, my journey hasn't been without challenges. Transitioning from accounting to marine sector development required me to strategically build expertise. Working with 88 fishermen in the shellfish co-op meant balancing diverse interests and modernising operations while respecting tradition. Leading the Páirc na Mara planning process has tested my strategic thinking, as I navigate regulatory requirements and stakeholder expectations. Additionally, addressing critical skills shortages in the marine sector led me to collaborate with the Education and Training Board to develop training programmes that meet emerging industry needs.

My Advice

Lege your existing expertise as your entry point—your perspective can make sustainability economically viable, even in highly technical rooms. Embrace interdisciplinary thinking, invest in building genuine relationships with coastal communities, seek mentors and stay adaptable. The Blue Economy needs more women leaders, and supporting each other creates collective strength in this evolving sector.

*“Like the tides,
progress takes time -
but it is unstoppable.”*



Margarida Martins

Innovation Coordinator at ALGplus

Portugal



Revitalising Traditions: From healing wounds to shaping seaweed-based products

Since childhood, I've felt a deep connection to the Ocean. Every summer, I returned to a beach in northern Portugal, where my grandfather would ask me to collect seaweed. He believed that rubbing green algae on his skin could help heal wounds—something I've since learned has real scientific basis. That early wisdom stayed with me, and—by coincidence or perhaps fate—I ended up building a career in seaweed research. My journey has been deeply rewarding. In addition to publishing in high-impact journals, I've contributed to advancing the field by exploring seaweed-based bioactive compounds. My PhD on seaweed valorisation was awarded with distinction and recognised with the 2021 Best PhD Thesis Award by the international journal Marine Drugs.

Today, I work as the Innovation Coordinator at ALGplus, a company that cultivates organic-certified seaweed using an innovative and sustainable model. I know I am on the right track. I always trusted the benefits of seaweed, and now, I have scientific proof to validate the beliefs my grandfather held so strongly. I'm proud to oversee the process from start: organic-certified seaweed cultivation using sustainable practices.

Transitioning from academia to the private sector was not without challenges—it demanded resilience and willingness to grow in new directions. But both experiences were fundamental to shaping my professional journey. Women have long held a vital role in the world of seaweed. Deeply rooted in coastal traditions, they're the strength and natural wisdom. Today, it's inspiring to witness women are also the face in innovation, scientific research, sustainable business, and shaping the future of the Blue Economy.

My Advice

Believe in your knowledge, trust your instincts, and never be afraid to take up space in the room. The Blue Economy is vast, full of opportunities, and in need of diverse perspectives. Seek out mentors, build strong networks, and don't be afraid to challenge the status quo. Most importantly, be passionate about your work. Passion fuels resilience, and resilience will take you further than you ever imagined.

”Be the change you want to see in the world”



Maria Soares

Microalgae Biotech Lab at Solmeya



Small Actions, Big Impact: Leading with Purpose in the Microalgae Revolution

I don't see myself as one of those ocean women who are already well-known or celebrated in their field—not yet, at least. But I've learned that real change often comes from quiet, steady work. For the past nine years, I've worked with microalgae, where innovation meets climate action and where the future of our Oceans can take shape.

I don't have a story filled with awards or a public spotlight. What I do have is a daily commitment—and I'm proud to be part of the network of women in science laying the groundwork for a more sustainable future. I'm also at a point where I want to grow, stand out more in the industry, and give back by using my voice, even through volunteering, to speak for the Ocean—because I truly believe our planet's future depends on it.

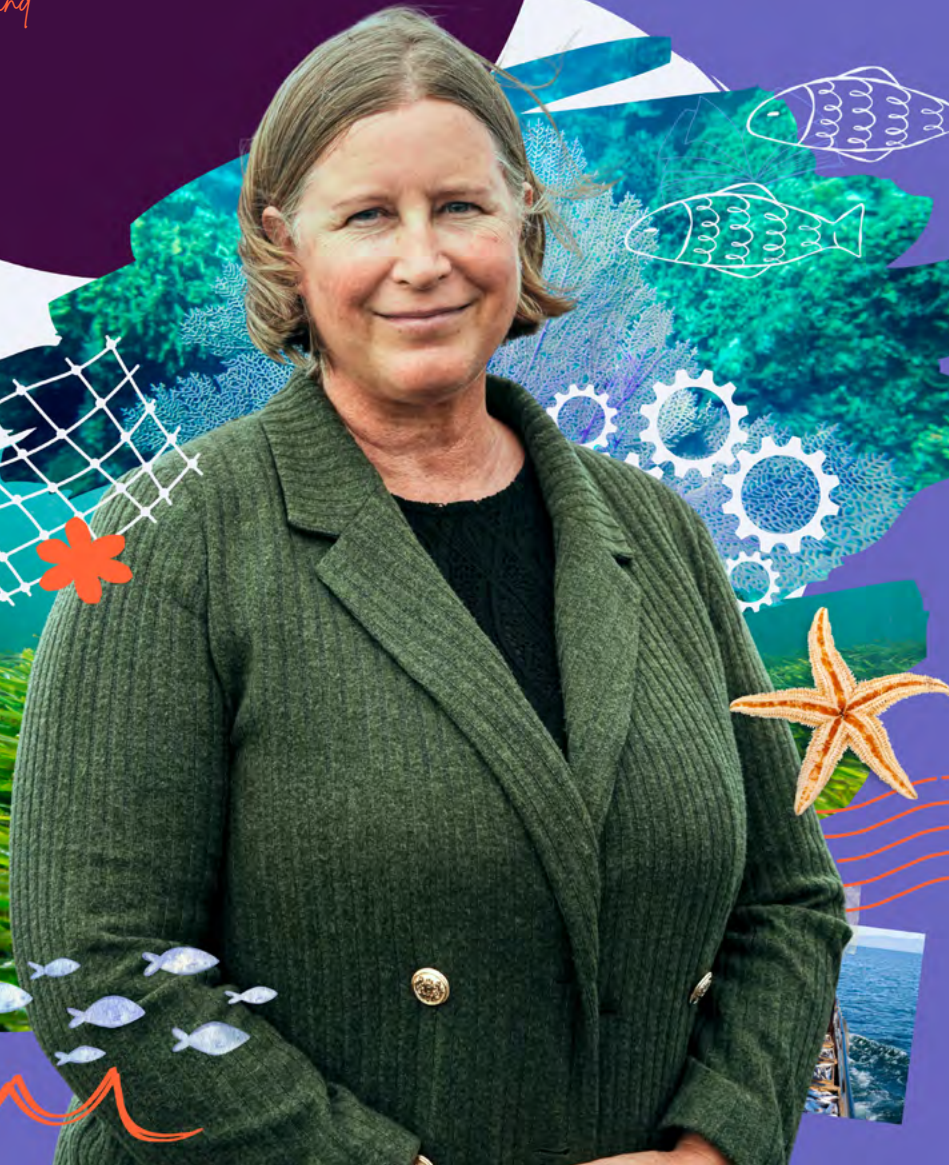
Working in industrial and start-up environments, I've focused on the potential of microalgae across carbon offset, food, cosmetics, and other solutions that this tiny resource can offer. The most significant challenge has been being a woman in a tech-focused industry, where opportunities can still feel limited—especially for technical roles beyond the lab, and for leadership positions. That reality has forced me to be persistent, to keep proving my value, and to choose carefully where I invest my energy.

What keeps me grounded is my values. I believe empathy, science, respect, and equality are pillars we need to guide us, and I try to live that every day. I don't see being a woman as a weakness in this field, but as a strength: the ability to lead with care, act with purpose, and motivate others without losing yourself.

My Advice

Live by your values. The actions that truly change the world are not always the loudest—they're the small, everyday choices we make. Small acts of kindness, rooted in compassion, create a ripple effect. You don't need to be famous to move the world forward—some of the most inspiring people are those we know personally.

*"The Ocean stirs the heart,
inspires the imagination and
brings eternal joy to the soul."
Wyland*



Melanie Symes

Nautical consultant / Marina association manager at
Innovamarina

Spain



Empowering Women in Boating

My three decades in nautical tourism have been an extraordinary voyage—fun, rewarding, and constantly insightful, largely because of the people I've met along the way. From seasoned mariners to visionary entrepreneurs, their passion has shaped my own path and given me a front-row seat to how our industry is evolving, and where it still needs to do better.

That perspective pushed me to turn lessons into action. One of my proudest achievements has been creating the "Introduction to Sustainability in Marinas", a compendium now in its third edition. It brings together over 35 articles on environmental and social good practices across nautical tourism and showcases the work of more than 25 experts—practical knowledge that helps marinas and the wider sector move from intention to impact.

But sustainability isn't the only change we need. I've encountered gender inequality firsthand—on boats, in meetings, and even when trying to raise issues shared by other women in the field. What was once dismissed as anecdotal is now backed by data: women in boating still face a lack of equitable visibility and opportunities, and discriminatory behaviour remains a reality. That experience became a turning point for me. It's why I initiated and now chair the ICOMIA Diversity Committee: to create a platform that generates evidence, explores the barriers, and, just as importantly, gathers the stories and perspectives that show what inclusion can look like in practice. That work led to the publication "Innovating Inclusion: Supporting Women in the Boating Industry", with one clear aim—champion diversity and empower women across the sector.

My Advice

Look around and identify role models. Don't be afraid to ask for help and guidance. Benefit from lifelong learning and always aim for win-win solutions.

"The most beautiful things we do are invisible"



Natali Santos

EU Project Manager at University of the Azores

Portugal



Island Hoping For Conservation Across Continents

As a proud Portuguese-Brazilian citizen, I carry nearly 20 years of experience in natural resource management, ecological restoration, and conservation. My journey has taken me across Brazil, Portugal, Canada, Angola, and even Antarctica, where I researched ocean pollution. As an oceanographer, sailor, passionate kitesurfer, and yoga instructor I believe all these activities allow me to express my profound bond with the Ocean as it is a source of inspiration, a teacher, and an integral part of my identity. Each wave, each breeze, and each moment spent on the water resonates deeply within me, shaping my purpose and guiding my commitment to protect and preserve our precious marine environments.

Between 2013 and 2017, I embarked on a personal circumnavigation sailing project, which deepened my bond with the sea. This journey solidified my commitment to protecting marine environments. As a child born on an island and now residing on another, the Ocean is not merely my profession - it is my sanctuary.

In my career, I've faced several challenges—spending long periods offshore while working on fishing vessels and navigating a male-dominated field. Breaking through stereotypes required proving my skills and building strong professional relationships. In recent years, navigating political bureaucracies has slowed decision-making and created obstacles, requiring strategic communication to ensure project success. Despite these challenges, my journey has been one of growth and determination, and I continue to work towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with our Oceans.

My Advice

Embrace your passion and stay curious! Network actively with others in the field, seek mentorship, and don't hesitate to share your ideas. Remember, collaboration is key in the Blue Economy. Stay resilient and advocate for your voice - your perspective is invaluable in shaping sustainable practices.

*"Embrace resilience,
seek continuous learning,
build strong networks,
and trust in your value to
lead change in the
Blue Economy."*



Priscila Velázquez Ortuño

Scientist / Technologist at Oceanic Platform of the
Canary Islands (PLOCAN)



Building Bridges: Engineering, Inclusion, Sustainability and the Blue Economy

From the very beginning of my career in engineering and technology, I encountered challenges that forged my resilience and deepened my passion for innovation. Growing up in an environment where opportunities were scarce taught me the value of determination, continuous learning, and perseverance—values that have guided my commitment to driving meaningful change, particularly in promoting inclusion and sustainable development across the STEM fields.

My professional journey spans scientific research, project management, and technological development, with sustainability as a cross-cutting focus. I have directed my work towards advancing the circular economy in isolated territories, strengthening sustainable research careers, promoting open science, and empowering women in the blue economy. I firmly believe that sharing knowledge and placing the right tools in people's hands is the foundation for building stronger, more inclusive and innovative scientific communities.

Among my notable achievements is my collaboration on sustainable marine and agri-food resource management projects through aquaponic systems complemented by renewable energy, which enhance productivity within the blue economy and contribute to environmental conservation—driving circular economy models where technology, sustainability, and resilience converge.

One of the most persistent challenges has been the need to prove my expertise in a historically male-dominated field. By building a professional network and committing to continuous learning, I was able to overcome those obstacles and help pave the way for inclusion and innovation in the blue economy sector.

My Advice

Embrace resilience and continuous learning. The Blue Economy is full of opportunities to innovate and make a real impact. Build networks, seek mentors, and don't hesitate to take on leadership roles. Above all, believe in yourself and stay curious; the Ocean's future depends on diverse voices like yours.

"My preferred place is at the table beside my enemies - because that's an opportunity to change the world"



Raquel Gaspar

Co-founder and Marine Biologist of Ocean Alive

Portugal



Seeing the Sea Through Dolphins' Eyes

Born on the smallest day of the year in central Portugal, I grew up surrounded by fields and farmlands, but my heart was always drawn to the sea. Inspired by Jacques Cousteau, I dreamed of becoming a marine biologist at 15. My journey led me to the Azores, where I lived aboard the research vessel 'Song of the Whale' and helped produce Portugal's first whale-watching regulations. A pivotal moment came when I dove beside a whale, realising my calling was ocean conservation.

I spent 20 years at the Sado Estuary Natural Reserve, monitoring its small resident bottlenose dolphin population. I pursued a PhD to understand how we could halt their decline and protect their fragile habitat. I learned that protecting dolphins meant protecting the seagrass meadows that nourish their prey—conservation was about removing human pressures.

Motherhood shifted my focus. With three children, I transitioned to ocean science communication, co-founding Ocean Alive and creating "Keepers of the Sea," a group of local women protecting seagrass. Our work is now recognised as one of Europe's best community-led conservation projects, and Ocean Alive won the 2024 Natura 2000 Award.

A personal challenge I faced was learning to understand myself. I lacked the tools to set boundaries, but mentorship and embracing my inner space—dancing in the sea and forest—helped me grow. Today, I see life as an ever-evolving journey. From dolphins to seagrass meadows, I believe that life is like a trampoline—the deeper the fall, the higher the vision.

My Advice

Life is like a trampoline: the deeper the fall the higher your vision will be.

"What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."
Jane Goodall



Roisin Mc Cormack

COO / Co-Founder of Gkinetic Energy

Ireland



From Water to Watts: Leading the Charge in Clean Energy from Rivers to Tides

I have been leading my own company for over 10 years, pioneering a new approach to harnessing clean, secure energy from flowing water in rivers, tides, and canals. Our technology is designed to work in harmony with nature, keeping the solution simple and accessible to all. Our units are easy to deploy, moored like a boat, and instantly generate power. We believe everyone should have access to clean, affordable energy, and our solution is just one part of a larger, life-changing puzzle for communities and businesses worldwide.

The journey hasn't been easy—commercialising a new hard-tech solution in a natural water environment presents many obstacles. But I'm incredibly proud of what we've achieved, thanks to our dedicated team. Rivers and tides around the world hold the potential for hundreds of gigawatts of clean energy, and this is what drives me. The power we generate can change lives—ensuring steady, on-site, self-owned energy that fuels better businesses, employment, education, and medical services.

On a personal level, I'm an avid sailor and sea swimmer. Spending time along the coastline, connecting with nature, is where I feel most at peace. I firmly believe that the world was made for nature, not for us, and we have a responsibility to protect it.

We've secured equity investment from the positive impact VC 'Katapult Ocean,' and are now at the very exciting phase of commercial pilot projects with our technology. We are so motivated to see our units out in the real world, creating meaningful positive impacts and we remain fully focused on our vision, constantly working towards securing a cleaner, more sustainable energy future.

My Advice



I think we can put unbelievable pressure on ourselves; my main advice would be to just go easy on yourself and be kinder to yourself.

"The cure for anything is salt, water, sweat, tears, or the sea."



Vera Quinlan

Marine Scientist for INFOMAR at the Marine Institute of Ireland

Ireland



A Journey from Science to Sailing

From a young age, I was drawn to the Ocean. This passion led me to study Marine Science and Hydrographic Surveying at Liverpool John Moores University, followed by a Master's in Coastal Zone Management. At the Marine Institute I contribute to seabed surveys, maintain mapping technology and produce detailed seabed maps, crucial for navigation safety, resource management, environmental conservation, and scientific research. I'm proud that my work helps guide better decisions for our seas.

Entering marine science in the 1990s, I faced constant challenges in a male-dominated field. To navigate these, I used humor to build rapport, which made me stronger and more empathetic. These experiences fueled my commitment to encouraging women in STEM, and if my journey inspires even one woman to step into this field, I'll consider that a success.

In 2018, my family and I embarked on a 14-month sailing adventure aboard our yacht, Danú. We sailed over 13,000 nautical miles, exploring Europe's western coasts, crossing the Atlantic, and visiting the Caribbean. This transformative journey strengthened our bond and deepened our connection to the Ocean. It also taught me that personal values can align with professional goals.

Throughout my career, I've stayed focused on one key belief: our future is tied to the health of our oceans. Through my work in seabed mapping, I aim to contribute to sustainable marine management, ensuring development doesn't come at the cost of destruction. Collaboration with colleagues and staying focused on the bigger picture helps me manage the emotional weight of the responsibility.

My Advice

Be that bold brave fearless Blue Warrior. Know that your voice is needed and your perspective is powerful. This field—spanning science, innovation, sustainability, and policy—thrives on diversity. Don't wait for permission to take your place at the table. Be curious. Be courageous. And above all, be yourself. The Ocean needs champions from every walk of life. There's a place here for you.

THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA



"Failing brings you closer to the solution and is part of the journey - giving up is not."

África Marrero del Rosario

Assistant Professor at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Spain



From Salt and Lava to Decarbonised Seas

Since childhood, I dreamed of becoming a doctor, but just before starting university, a friend asked me, "What do you love the most?" My answer was clear: the sea. As a Canarian, the Ocean has always been part of my life. That's when I realised my true vocation: naval engineering, a path written in my DNA made of "lava y agüita salada."

In 2016, I discovered a challenge that would mark me deeply: improving the quality of the air we breathe and the water that surrounds us. Since then, I've focused on transforming maritime transport between islands. From fire prevention on roll-on/roll-off vessels to a PhD thesis on the decarbonisation of maritime transport in the Canary Islands, it's been an exciting and fulfilling journey. Today, I'm driven to prove that it's possible to protect our environment while advancing towards a sustainable and prosperous future.

I've also been able to contribute to the decarbonisation conversation with solutions rooted in local reality, not abstract theory, and I'm also proud of something less measurable but just as important: representing Canarian women in spaces where we're still underrepresented, making our talent visible for the young women who want a future connected to the Ocean.

The hard part has been finding my place in a sector that remains deeply male-dominated. Many times, I was the only young woman in technical environments or key meetings, and I often had to work harder to have my contributions recognised. At the same time, I balanced continuous education with demanding projects—something that required real organisation and sacrifice, but also brought mentors who helped me keep going. My next destination is completing my Law degree with a specialisation in maritime law, so I can defend our oceans not only technically, but legally too.

Don't wait for permission to step in. Ask questions, make mistakes, and grow along the way. If you feel like you don't fit in at first, trust that we've all been there—the Blue Economy needs your drive and passion, and the rest you'll build step by step.

"May fortune catch you while you're working."



Aina Bauza Roig

Independent Sailor

France



First Woman, First Solo Monohull: Rewriting the Cádiz-Bahamas Atlantic Crossing

Since my earliest days on the water, I have embraced challenges and pushed the limits of what is possible in offshore sailing. What began as a childhood adventure, exploring the coast of Mallorca, evolved into both my passion and profession. Over the past 20 years, I have competed in some of the world's most prestigious offshore races, navigating some of the most demanding waters on the planet.

In 2024, I made history by setting a solo transatlantic sailing record, covering 8,300 km (4,500 nautical miles) from Cádiz, Spain, to San Salvador, Bahamas, in 30 days, 22 hours, and 34 minutes. This achievement, officially certified by the World Sailing Speed Record Council (WSSRC), made me the first person to complete this route solo on a monohull—and the first woman to ever do so. With this record, I have proudly established myself as a leading figure in Spanish offshore sailing.

Beyond offshore racing, I also trained in Olympic sailing circuit, competing as a member of the Spanish national sailing team from 2011 to 2019. During this time, I participated in World and European Championships, earning the title of Spanish Champion in 2017. My career continues to be driven by a deep passion for the sea, the thrill of competition, and the pursuit of new challenges in ocean racing.

My Advice

Keep trying despite the setbacks.

"Be a beacon for change: protect the Ocean, shift the sector, and make equality the norm - not the exception"



Ana Arévalo Gandal

Head of Shorepower of the Port de Barcelona

Spain



Electrifying One of Europe's Busiest Ports

I am a Naval Architect and Marine Engineer, and since 2020, I have led the electrification department at the Port of Barcelona, driving NEXIGEN, a €200 million strategic plan to reduce port emissions by 47% and position the port as a European sustainability leader.

I consider myself an inspirational example because I've transformed my career with purpose, consistency, and conviction, seeking a place where I can create real impact in sustainability. I have stayed in rooms where I was the only woman and worked to open space for others. I lead through action, with strategic vision, technical rigor, and a belief in collaboration. My 25+ years of experience span shipyards, multinational naval and logistics companies, and 12 years as Commercial Manager at the Port, promoting Short Sea Shipping. I've always advanced and led in male-dominated sectors, staying true to my values and guiding purpose.

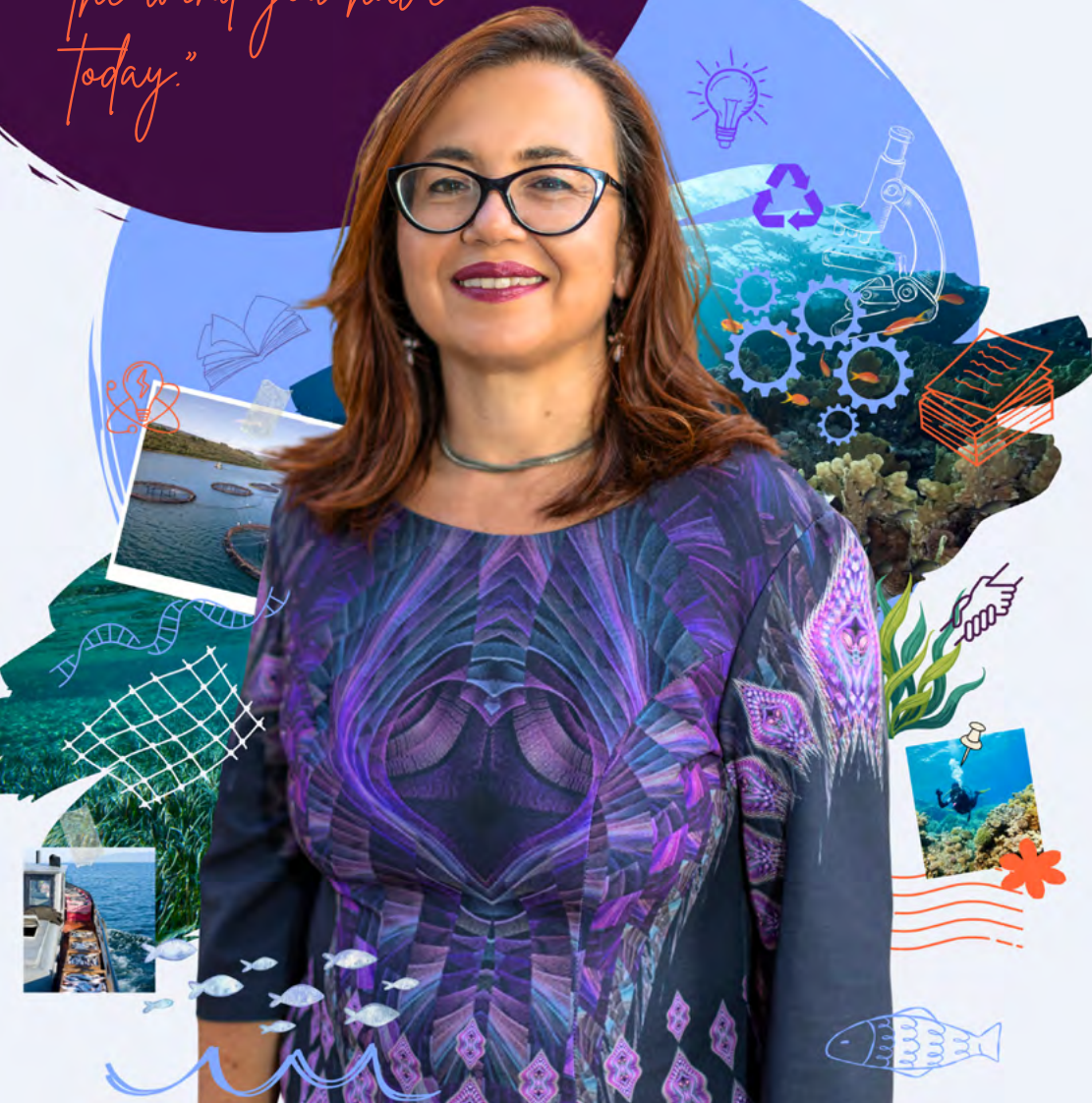
My proudest achievements include leading NEXIGEN, a comprehensive quay electrification plan that began with the installation of the first cold ironing system for container ships in Southern Europe, and promoting Short Sea Shipping for 12 years. I've also coordinated complex, multi-stakeholder projects that integrate technical, legal, and regulatory aspects, enabling scalable, impactful sustainability solutions.

One of the greatest challenges I faced was carving out my space as a woman in male-dominated environments. I overcame this by listening carefully, preparing thoroughly, and speaking with clarity and conviction. This built respect and opened doors—not just for me, but for others who followed.

My Advice

Don't wait for permission to take your place—claim it. The Blue Economy needs your voice, your courage, and your perspective. Build alliances, seek role models, become one yourself, and speak up about inequalities. Change happens when we move forward together—with strength, passion, and determination

"Don't wait for the perfect moment to chase your dream - build the life you want with the wind you have today."



Angele Giuliano
Entrepreneur, AcrossLimits



Making the Ocean a Home, Not Just a Workplace

Three years ago, I made the leap—and I haven't looked back since. Now, I live a nomadic life aboard *Gelene*, my 37-foot sailing boat, floating between Greek islands while running my business, *AcrossLimits* from wherever we drop anchor each week. One week my office window opens to a sleepy fishing village, the next to a turquoise bay with only a few curious dolphins nearby. And yes, the Wi-Fi still works.

People often tell me I'm "living their dream," but here's the truth: dreams only work if you do. I didn't wait for retirement, a perfect moment, or a trust fund. I made a plan, downsized, trained hard, and took the plunge. It hasn't always been smooth sailing—literally—but it's been worth every bruise, broken bone, and stormy night. My health is better, my stress is lower, and waking up to the sound of water lapping against the hull is a joy no city apartment ever gave me.

Through my journey, I've networked with other sailors and nomad entrepreneurs, mentored startup companies within the Blue Economy, and advocated living frugally and honestly, in touch with the seas. I've learned to run strategy calls in anchorages, write reports with salt in my hair, and meet deadlines with a sunset in view.

Challenges like downsizing, attending fewer conferences, and delegating more to my team while sailing have been difficult, but they've helped me grow.



My Advice

Learn the skills, trust your instincts, and know that you can handle the sea—and the business—on your own terms. Strength isn't about muscle, it's about mindset. Start small, start smart, but start now. Life is short—sail it fully.

"The harder I prepare,
the luckier I seem to get."

Michael Jordan



Barbara Arbanas Ferreira

Researcher, Acting Head of Research Department at Centre of Excellence MARBLE

Croatia



Engineering the Ocean's Next Generation of Robots

I consider myself an inspiring example because I've built a career in marine robotics, a field where women are still underrepresented. My path hasn't always been straightforward, but I've remained curious, open to growth, and committed to making a meaningful contribution. Over the last few years, I've led teams in cutting-edge robotics and marine technology, including coordinating over 20 researchers to win first place in one of the most prestigious robotics competitions in the world. Along the way, I've juggled my demanding career with being a mother—taking part in field trials and even spending a month with my infant daughter at a competition abroad.

Balancing career and motherhood wasn't easy, and there were many moments of doubt, stress, and exhaustion. But I took each day as it came, committed to my work and my family. My daughter is my constant reminder of why I do what I do: to show her and others that you can follow your passion, lead with confidence, and be present as a parent at the same time.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was leading a team of 20 researchers over more than two years as we prepared for the MBZIRC robotics competition. It was a long, demanding journey filled with technical setbacks, logistical hurdles, and constant time pressure. On top of that, I brought my baby daughter to field trials and even spent a full month with her at the competition in Abu Dhabi. Balancing the intense workload, leadership responsibilities, and motherhood was incredibly stressful. What helped me through it all was taking things one day at a time and staying grounded, believing that I could handle whatever came next. My daughter has been my greatest motivation throughout this. I want her to see that it's possible to follow your passions, even when the path is challenging or unconventional.

I make space for others by raising awareness of these topics and promoting inclusive practices in research and academia. I encourage girls to consider careers in the technical sciences and hope my story shows the power of challenging old assumptions and supporting one another.

My Advice

Don't wait until you feel ready—start and grow as you go. Eventually, the path will show itself. The Blue Economy needs diverse voices, and your perspective matters. Take things step by step, and don't be afraid to ask for support. Most importantly, define success on your own terms. What matters most is building something that you are proud of.

”Believe in your own comeback.”



Camila Rodrigues de Carvalho

CTO (and Co-founder) of EONSEA

Spain



Teaching AI to See Underwater Damage

Since childhood, the Ocean and technology have been my two greatest passions. Born in Brazil, I knew I had to step out of my comfort zone to grow professionally. I moved to Spain, adapting to a new culture while carving a path in highly technical, male-dominated industries. Without connections or a clear roadmap, I became a go-getter—creating opportunities where none existed.

With a background in engineering and expertise in artificial intelligence and robotics, I co-founded EONSEA, a deep-tech company transforming underwater inspections through computer vision and AI. Inspecting submerged vessels and port infrastructure has traditionally been costly and time-consuming. Our technology automates damage detection, making inspections faster, safer, and more sustainable—reducing the need for divers, lowering costs, and minimizing environmental impact.

Building a startup as a woman and immigrant in a conservative sector was challenging. I had to learn business development, fundraising, and commercialisation from scratch. Through accelerators, mentorship, and determination, EONSEA grew into a recognised innovator—named one of the “100 Startups to Invest in 2025” by ‘El Referente’ and finalist in major competitions. Being listed among the “25 Women to Watch in 2025” further strengthened my commitment to female leadership in deep-tech.

My Advice

Don't wait for permission to take up space—the Blue Economy belongs to you too. Resilience and adaptability matter as much as technical skill. Build your network, seek allies, and if you don't see someone like you in the room, be the one who opens that door.

*"Don't wait for permission to renew-
innovate. Build the future
you believe in, and bring
others with you!"*



Carla Decarolis

Co-founder BIOCHICA Start up, Dir. R&D



Turning Waste Into High-Valued Products

With over 20 years of experience in biomass valorisation, I've built a career at the intersection of science, sustainability, and innovation. My journey started in academia and development cooperation, where I contributed to international projects and worked as an EU project evaluator. Along the way, I realised the power of entrepreneurship and, in 2020 co-founded Biochica, a female-led startup focused on turning marine waste into high-value bio-based products using green chemistry and circular innovation. My goal has always been clear: to create solutions that benefit both the planet and society.

The challenges of leading in a male-dominated sector have never held me back. At Biochica, we developed products from marine waste like blue crab shells, all while staying true to our commitment to sustainability and gender equity. The recognition has been humbling: winning awards like BioInvest IT - Trieste 2024, COPILOT Hackathon 2024, and the Best Start-up for Innovative Italian Sectors Award in 2025 from ITA-USA Foundation are just some of the milestones that validate our vision.

The road to success hasn't always been easy. Navigating a field dominated by male counterparts often meant proving myself again and again. At times, I faced challenges of power dynamics and unbalanced contributions in collaborative environments, but I've overcome these by building credibility, nurturing partnerships, and staying focused on the science and mission.

A stylized, handwritten signature in orange ink.

My Advice

Trust in your voice and vision. Build it day by day on real needs and tangible solutions. Trust your intuition and reflection; they often carry more weight than external opinions. Lead with dignity and bring your full self into your work—especially in spaces where women are underrepresented. Innovation is not just about technology; it's about courage, purpose, and inclusivity.

"The sea, once it casts its spell, holds one in its net of wonder forever."

Jacques Cousteau



Carlotta Sacco Perasso

Heritage Scientist at National Superintendency for Underwater Cultural Heritage (Ministry of Culture) and University of Calabria



Leading the Way in Underwater Heritage and Innovation

Growing up with a deep love for both science and cultural heritage, I've spent my career as a heritage scientist specialising in underwater cultural heritage. From working on biodeterioration and the conservation of submerged materials, to applying my expertise in marine environments, I've dedicated myself to protecting and preserving the rich cultural assets beneath the water's surface.

Throughout my journey, I've faced several challenges, particularly in working in a highly interdisciplinary field where science, cultural heritage, and marine environments intersect. There was no predefined professional path, no clear framework, and many times, I had to navigate between scientific rigor and the practical needs of conservation in demanding underwater environments. But I embraced the challenge by investing in continuous learning—whether that was diving certifications, field experience, or project management training.

Another challenge I've encountered is the need to promote the recognition and visibility of scientific roles within cultural heritage institutions. As a woman in this field, I've often had to advocate for the value of science in heritage policy and practice. To overcome this, I became actively involved in professional associations like the National Association of Experts in Diagnostics and Sciences and Technologies Applied to Cultural Heritage (ANEDbc), where I now serve as President, advocating for the role of science in heritage protection and raising awareness of the scientific dimension within the Blue Economy.

My Advice

Don't wait for a perfect path—create your own. This sector is still evolving, and especially in interdisciplinary fields like underwater cultural heritage, the road is not always clearly mapped. But that's part of the opportunity. Build your expertise confidently, stay curious, and dive into both the field and research. Surround yourself with people who respect your contributions, join professional associations, and never hesitate to speak up, even when it feels uncomfortable. Representation matters, and your work is shaping the future of a more inclusive, sustainable Blue Economy.

"Don't let the fear of losing keep you from participating."



Carlotta Santolini

Administrator Of Mariscadoras Srl Benefit,
PhD in Climate Change And Sustainable Development



From Blue Crab Crisis to Women-Led Sustainable Fisheries

My journey is proof that passion can be transformed into a project with real impact. After years of studying marine biology, I set out to tackle an urgent environmental issue: the uncontrolled spread of the blue crab, an invasive species disrupting marine ecosystems and threatening local fishermen's livelihoods.

I saw an opportunity within this challenge. Determined to turn the problem into a solution, I co-founded Mariscadoras Srl Benefit, a company led by five women under thirty, breaking barriers in the traditionally male-dominated fishing industry while promoting gender equality in line with Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda. Through Mariscadoras, we launched Blueat – The Sustainable Fishery, creating a market for blue crab in Italy and expanding exports to the USA and Korea. This initiative not only mitigates the crab's ecological impact but also provides fishermen with a sustainable source of income.

Beyond the fishery, I focus on maximizing sustainability. We repurpose blue crab waste by extracting chitosan, a valuable compound used in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and sustainable packaging, reinforcing the circular economy. My commitment extends beyond business—I collaborate with schools to educate young generations, participate in research projects, and promote citizen science, involving local communities in data collection.

By integrating science, economy, and awareness, I strive to show that passion and determination can drive tangible, positive change—for both the environment and society.

My Advice

Keep pushing forward, even when the sector feels closed or traditionally male-dominated. Networking is essential—especially among women. The Ocean is at the heart of today's biggest environmental and economic challenges, and there is space for new ideas, new leadership, and new ways of working. By building strong connections and supporting one another, we can show our value, contribute meaningfully to ocean health, and create solutions that serve both the environment and society. Together, our impact is stronger and more lasting.

"When we get to that river we will cross that bridge"



Carmen Chamorro

Fishing Shipowner, Redeira (fish-net mender) and president of ACERGA (Galician Association of Surrounding Net Fishing shipowners)

Spain



Making the Unseen Work of Net Makers Visible

Born in Panxón in 1967, I grew up in a family deeply connected to the fishing tradition, where "the boat was a member of the family." My great-grandfather was a purse seine owner, fishing off the Galician and Portuguese coasts, and the boats were passed down to my father and eventually to my brother Fermín and me.

While the women in my family were responsible for administrative tasks, sales, and net repair, they played an essential role in our work, even without social recognition. Inspired by them, I dreamed of being part of the maritime world and trained as a deep-sea skipper, although my opportunities to steer the boat never came.

Determined to bring change to the sector, I joined the Cangas Net Makers Association and fought for the professionalisation of net makers. For over ten years, I worked to improve working conditions, combat intrusion into the trade, and raise social recognition. Eventually, I became a trainer at the Moaña workshop school. Later, as president of ACERGA (Galician Association of Surrounding Net Fishing Shipowners), I took on one of the most pressing challenges: the lack of generational renewal.

Challenges I've faced include being looked down on for being a woman and dealing with paternalism. But especially, learning to live with it and work on not letting it affect you.

My advice to other women: Never show weakness. Don't blame yourself when you fail or don't achieve everything. Don't be hard on yourself—that's a burden.

"Your beliefs are the foundation of your dreams - carve them in stone, and nothing will stand in your way."



Celia Murcia

Founder and CEO of Blue-jobs

Spain



From "No Jobs" to Blue-Jobs: Creating Career Pathways for the Ocean

After earning my degree in marine sciences, I faced an unsettling reality—finding a job in the field was far from easy. Opportunities seemed scattered, hidden, or simply nonexistent. Many of my classmates, disheartened by the struggle, abandoned their dreams and pursued careers in unrelated fields. Watching this unfold, I knew something had to change. That's when I founded Blue-Jobs, a platform dedicated to connecting passionate individuals with career opportunities in marine sciences and the Blue Economy.

My vision was simple: to help young professionals find their place, whether it's conducting research at sea, shaping policies from an office, or travelling the world to make a difference. But my mission didn't stop there. Today, I work with fellow entrepreneurs, guiding them in turning innovative ideas into thriving businesses that drive sustainability in the Blue Economy. I help them see beyond traditional paths, opening doors to careers they may never have considered—ones that champion marine conservation while achieving success.

I believe in this: when we pursue our passions with purpose, we create waves of change—not just for ourselves, but for the future of our oceans.

My Advice

My advice is to find your tribe—especially women who inspire you, challenge you, and genuinely want to see you win. Entrepreneurship and ocean careers can feel lonely when you're building something new, so don't try to do it all on your own. When you surround yourself with the right people, you grow faster, you stay grounded, and you start seeing opportunities you would have missed alone. That's when your business can really thrive—and your sense of purpose grows with it.

"Independently of what other people do, I do whatever I think is the right thing to do."



Cristina Cervera Núñez

Head of the Maritime Spatial Planning department at the Spanish Institute of Oceanography (IEO, CSIC)



From Feeling “Fish Out of Water” to Shaping Mediterranean Sea Plans

I was born near the sea. I wasn't a beach lizard, but the Ocean was always there—a familiar presence. I never realised how much I relied on it until I moved far away. Suddenly, I felt disoriented, as if I had lost my natural compass—like a fish out of water.

When I completed my degree in Environmental Sciences, I knew I wanted to dedicate myself to the Ocean. Despite having only one marine ecology course in five years of study, it was enough to make me understand: we are all lost without the Ocean.

So, when I had the chance to receive a scholarship for the Erasmus Mundus Master in Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP), I didn't hesitate. This journey took me from the Azores, in the middle of the Atlantic, to Perth, Australia, with stops in Goa, India, and Venice, Italy, where I defended my thesis.

Since then, I've worked with the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC-UNESCO) and now at the Spanish Institute of Oceanography (IEO, CSIC). Today, I lead the MSP service, advising the Spanish Ministry on implementing the EU MSP Directive while collaborating internationally on transboundary projects.

Currently, I coordinate MEDIGREEN, a project uniting partners from Italy, France, Malta, Greece, Algeria, and Tunisia to promote the sustainable development of maritime activities in the Mediterranean. Our goal is to rethink how we use and care for the Ocean and to reconnect with what it truly means to us—rediscovering a path we may have lost along the way.

My Advice

Let's do it better

"Whenever I face resistance, I remind myself that every great change was once considered impossible."



Cristina Aleixendri Muñoz

Deputy CEO & Co-founder of Bound4blue

Spain



Embracing Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things

As a child, I dreamed of becoming a doctor, driven by the desire to make a positive impact on people's lives. But as I grew older, I realised that there are many ways to create change. I became fascinated by how technology shapes the world around us and how innovation can solve challenges that affect millions at once, generating global impact. This realization led me to study aeronautical engineering, a field that constantly challenged me and gave me the mindset to think big and question assumptions.

During my studies, I became aware of shipping's enormous environmental footprint. Shipping is essential to global trade, yet it remains highly polluting and resistant to change. I saw an opportunity to bring ideas from aerospace into maritime transport and, with my co-founders, created bound4blue to reintroduce wind power to ships through modern, automated sails. Our goal is simple: cut fuel use and emissions, and make shipping more sustainable.

Working in a conservative industry has been one of my biggest challenges. Innovation often meets skepticism, so convincing shipowners takes persistence, resilience, and strong evidence. Step by step, we moved from an idea to real deployments, with our eSAIL® technology operating on commercial vessels—from tankers to RoRo and carriers. The most meaningful validation is seeing fuel savings in practice and shipowners choosing to install wind propulsion on more vessels.

As bound4blue grew from startup to scale-up, I had to learn to lead, delegate, and keep a shared vision. And as a young woman in a male-dominated sector, I've had to find my voice and earn credibility by being prepared and letting results speak louder than stereotypes.

My Advice

My advice to women aspiring to succeed in the Blue Economy is to believe in the value you bring to the table, even when others might underestimate it. This industry is still male-dominated, and at times you may feel like you have to prove yourself twice as much. Don't let that discourage you - let it fuel your determination. Most importantly, don't be afraid to take up space.

Eleni Polychronopoulou

President of ERMA TECH Group and HEMEXPO

Greece



Engineering Trust for Cleaner Shipping

I started at EPE, my family's company providing environmental protection equipment and services since 1977. When I took over R&D, I developed new products—but in 2009 I felt a bigger duty to the Ocean. I founded ERMA FIRST to design and certify a ballast water treatment system to protect seas from invasive species. Fifteen years later, ERMA FIRST is ranked second in the world, with more than 4,000 systems installed and a presence across the US, Europe, and Asia.

As our solutions matured, ERMA FIRST evolved into the ERMA TECH Group. Together with my team, we've delivered energy-saving devices for hull and propeller, onboard carbon capture and storage, and cold ironing. Through acquisitions, our portfolio has grown to include air lubrication, ultrasonic antifouling, variable frequency drives, and a tech company specialised in high-frequency data analytics—positioning the group among global leaders in marine equipment.

This journey wasn't effortless. The greatest challenge was convincing the international market, 15 years ago, that our systems could be both high-quality and competitively priced—while delivering excellent performance. The trust of Greek shipowners, combined with our technical adaptability to meet each vessel's unique needs, helped us earn that confidence and establish leadership.

Beyond the group, I've served for 11 years as president of the Association of Hellenic Marine Equipment Manufacturers and Exporters, working to strengthen the competitiveness of our industry. I also sit on the boards of HELMEPA and the Maria Tsakos Foundation. I'm happily married and the mother of one daughter—my most important role.

Be an expert at what you do. Study hard, know your field better than anyone at the table, and let knowledge be your biggest weapon—because with it, you can move an industry.

“Make a difference”



"Making this reality known, and its opportunity for female employment and for the new generations"



Esther Molina

General Manager at SunCruise Andalucía

Spain



Leading Blue Tourism with ESG Commitment

I am the general manager of an organisation that works with cruise lines, ports, and tourism operators, advocating for the Blue Economy and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles in tourism management. We made a significant step by signing the first commitment to apply ESG criteria in the blue tourism sector, and we are now publishing this commitment to a wide range of stakeholders—agencies, DMCs, ports, cruise lines, and both public and private institutions.

One of my proudest achievements is the commitment itself, which marks the beginning of our drive to incorporate sustainability into blue tourism practices. I've also organised forums focused on inclusivity and environmental sustainability, and participated as a committee member in the Sun&Blue Congress, helping to elevate the conversation around responsible tourism and the Blue Economy.

The main challenge I've encountered is promoting Andalusia as a key blue destination, while fostering job creation and business development linked to the Blue Economy. To achieve this, I've worked to create and participate in forums and events that inspire through real success stories and promote the integration of Blue Economy principles into local tourism strategies.



My Advice

Think blue and turn on the high lights.

"If you want to build a ship, do not begin by gathering people together to collect wood and assign tasks, nor by organising the work. Instead, first awaken in them a longing for the vast and boundless sea. Once this longing is awakened, they will set to work eagerly to build the ship."



Francesca Biondo

General Manager of Federpesca

Italy



Rewriting the Rules of Fisheries Leadership

Since 2019, I have served as Director of the National Federation of Fishing Enterprises (Federpesca) and President of the National Fisheries Observatory, becoming the first woman to lead Italy's main fisheries business federation in a sector historically shaped by male leadership. With a background in Environmental and Development Economics, I entered the fisheries world determined to connect economic resilience with environmental and social sustainability.

My work focuses on strengthening institutional dialogue between the fishing sector, national authorities, and European bodies, ensuring that sustainability is not an abstract concept but a practical pathway for the future of fisheries. As President of the National Fisheries Observatory, I organised Italy's first national training programme dedicated to women's empowerment in fisheries, supporting over 30 women across the country. I also authored the first national report mapping women's participation in the sector, creating an evidence base to inform gender-responsive policies.

One of my most demanding challenges has been advancing recognition for female family workers in fishing enterprises—roles that remain largely invisible under current Italian law. Driving regulatory and cultural change in such a complex institutional landscape required persistence, coalition-building, and credibility. I learned that authority in a male-dominated sector is built not through confrontation, but through data, dialogue, and measurable impact.



My Advice

Trust your expertise and do not wait for permission to lead. The Blue Economy needs women's competence, vision, and determination. Build your skills, strengthen your networks, and support one another—because sustainable progress is always a collective achievement.

“Every day I tell myself, courage is taking one step at a time.”



Gregoria Gioffre

Cooperative Fishing Owner, Pesca Futura Società Cooperativa and Marevivo



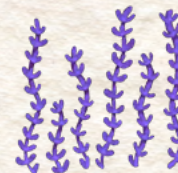
Building a Women-Led Fishing Cooperative in Calabria

I was born and raised in Australia, but at 16 I moved to Bagnara Calabria, in southern Italy, where I completed my studies and began discovering the world of fisheries. In 2006, fresh out of university, I started an internship at a maritime consulting firm in the fishing sector. I began by making photocopies and quietly listening to fishermen's discussions. I studied vessels, regulations, and the unspoken dynamics of a strongly male-driven industry. For years, I absorbed everything—criticism, challenges, and the deep-rooted culture of the sector—earning trust step by step.

In 2016, I took a bold leap and founded a fishing cooperative from scratch. Today, it manages and owns 43 fishing vessels across Calabria. My goal was not only economic growth, but protection and structure in a sector where safeguards are often limited.

I also wanted to give visibility to women—the silent force behind every fisherman. I created a women-led retail branch where catches are sold through dedicated trucks, fully managed by women responsible for filleting, preparation, and sales. It was a challenge in a male-dominated world, yet historically women have always been central to fisheries—from net-making to fish markets.

My journey has been about proving that ability has no gender. I've worked to defend the rights of those whose lives are rooted in the sea, promoting circular economy principles, local resource use, and ecological transition.



My Advice

Success is not a destination but a journey. Learn every day, support other women, and never forget that change begins with courage.

"If you want to build a ship, instil in the hearts of your men and women a longing for the sea"



Gwenaëlle Benoit

Innovation Leader - Decarbonisation Solutions at EKIUM

France



Working For The Gender And Decarbonisation Transitions

My career has been shaped by a deep connection to the Ocean and a commitment to advancing sustainable maritime solutions. Growing up by the sea, I chose materials science to understand how materials endure in marine environments—work that first took me into applied research and later into offshore engineering, where I thrived in multicultural teams and quickly grew into leadership roles.

I've never been afraid of bold transitions. I left a secure corporate career to join a smaller, innovation-driven company focused on decarbonising maritime industries. Today, as an innovation leader for offshore decarbonisation projects, I lead multidisciplinary teams, coordinate European collaborations, and represent my organisation at international conferences—always with the aim of accelerating responsible solutions at sea.

Some of the work I'm proudest of includes contributing to the approval in principle of a hydrogen-powered crew transfer vessel, and developing a floating hydrogen hub concept for the Scottish government—both showing what offshore hydrogen could enable for cleaner operations. Alongside project work, I also invest in changing the culture of the sector. As a board member of Pôle Mer Bretagne Atlantique, I co-authored the gender diversity charter, and I actively support initiatives by WISTA, Elles Bougent, and CINAU that highlight and encourage women's careers in the naval industry.

The biggest challenges have been navigating major transitions—moving from research to engineering, and from a large corporation to a smaller company. I overcame them by committing to continuous learning, seeking mentorship, and building a network from scratch through maritime associations and collaborative projects. With resilience and curiosity, I've learned to turn uncertainty into impact—for the Ocean and coastal communities.

My Advice

Be bold and trust your abilities—your perspective is valuable and needed in the Blue Economy. Don't hesitate to step forward, even when the path feels unfamiliar. Seek out opportunities, learn from every experience, and remember: you're not alone. There is a strong network of women and allies ready to support, inspire, and collaborate with you. Together, we are shaping a more inclusive and innovative future for the Ocean sector.

"My strength is not noise. It's doing the work, every day!"



Kyriaki Kampana

Cruise Manager, Deputy PFSO at Heraklion Port Authority



From Accounting to Cruise Operations

I never imagined the sea would change my life. As a professional accountant and Head of the Accounting Department at the Heraklion Port Authority, I was far from ships, passengers, or cruise operations. But when I stood next to a cruise ship for the first time, something clicked. I instantly fell in love with the vibrant energy of the vessels, the rhythm of operations, and the fact that every day brings a new challenge, a new story.

Though I had no background in the maritime sector, I embraced every opportunity and learned with passion and persistence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Heraklion was the first Greek port to implement health protocols and welcome cruise ships back to the Eastern Mediterranean in 2020. That experience taught me the power of adaptability, leadership, and courage — especially in uncharted waters.

Today, I serve as Cruise Manager and represent my port internationally as a MedCruise Board Member. My journey proves that it's never too late to follow your passion — even if it starts far from where you thought you'd end up. If I could shift from finance to cruise operations and thrive, so can any woman who dares to take that first step.

My proudest achievements include leading Heraklion Port's cruise restart during the pandemic, becoming a MedCruise Board Member, and transforming Heraklion into a homeporting hub, reaching a historic milestone of over 500,000 cruise passengers in 2024.

The greatest challenges I faced included making a radical shift from accounting to cruise operations, earning trust in an unfamiliar field, and coordinating the safe restart of cruise operations during COVID-19. Today, Heraklion is the 2nd homeport in Greece, and I'm proud that what once seemed ambitious is now a reality. Every challenge shaped me — not by removing fear, but by teaching me to move forward in spite of it.

My Advice

Don't wait to feel ready—most of us never do. The Blue Economy needs diverse women—bring your perspective, ask bold questions, and don't try to fit in. Growth comes from stepping into what scares you. Your strength isn't about being loud, but about showing up consistently. Step in. Learn. Stay. You'll go further than you think.

*"Never give up,
Life is more
imaginative than our
dreams could ever
carry"*



Laurianne Le Cossec

Founder and Président of Glaz

France



Designing Resilient Coastal Territories, Project by Project

My name is Laurianne Le Cossec. I'm a "Daughter of the Port", mother of 2 little salted kids, from Brittany, France. For over 20 years, I've been initiating and supporting projects focused on coastal and ocean sustainability. My mission: to build resilient coastal territories. As a passionate sailor and committed entrepreneur, I founded a maritime consultancy and a sustainable event agency to support coastal communities in the Blue Economy.

My entrepreneurial journey has been filled with storms, strategic doubts, and long, demanding swells requiring resilience. As a woman in both tech and maritime fields—often male-dominated—I had to assert myself, prove my skills, and carve out my own space of freedom and fulfillment. These challenges only strengthened my drive to promote a more inclusive vision of the Ocean: more social, more creative, more resilient.

I'm especially proud of co-developing innovative projects like PECHKEUR, a research-action initiative for fishers, KOGUS, a digital tool onboard fishing vessels, and PESKET, which combines local know-how and respect for marine resources.



My Advice

Don't follow a society that tries to make us all the same. Embrace and express your differences—in both life and work. And trust in cooperation: our strength lies in our ability to weave a shared and sustainable future.

"Aquaculture keeps us alive"



Leire Arantzamendi

Senior Researcher at AZTI

Spain



From Fish Nutrition to Nature-Based Aquaculture Solutions

With more than 15 years of experience in aquaculture and seafood product development, I have built my career at the intersection of marine science, quality assessment, and innovation. I studied Aquaculture and later completed a PhD in Marine Sciences at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, carrying out my research between the Canary Islands and France, where I focused on fish nutrition and aquatic ecosystems. From the beginning, my work has been driven by a desire to strengthen aquaculture as a sustainable, high-quality food system grounded in science.

After my doctorate, I continued my path in marine biotechnology and later returned to the Basque Country, where I led a food technology research group and co-founded the spin-off LEARTIKER, working to translate research into real solutions for seafood processing and product quality. Since joining AZTI in 2010 as a senior researcher, I have been deeply involved in national and European projects aimed at improving fish nutrition, animal welfare, and the sustainability of aquaculture systems. This work has also included advising public authorities and contributing to strategic planning for aquaculture development at regional level.

More recently, my research has focused on low-trophic aquaculture solutions, such as biobased ropes for mussel and seaweed cultivation, exploring their effectiveness as nature-based solutions within European projects. One of my proudest achievements has been securing a patent for these biobased materials, reflecting my commitment to reducing environmental impacts through innovation.

One of the main challenges I continue to face is the lack of general awareness and recognition of aquaculture as a sector that delivers quality food while driving technological progress. Changing perceptions requires strong science, transparency, and continuous dialogue with society.

My Advice

My advice is simple: listen to your heart.

"The Ocean is part of my ecosystem; I am terrestrial, but the sea is also my home."



María del Carmen García Martínez

Director of the Spanish Institute of Oceanography (IEO)

Spain



From Ocean Campaigns to the Helm: Making Space for Women in Marine Science Leadership

I don't know if I'm an inspiration, but I can share a journey that shows women can reach the highest levels in scientific institutions. I trained in Biology at the University of Seville and earned a PhD in Science at the University of Málaga. For years, I worked in the Mediterranean Climate Change Group at the Málaga Oceanographic Centre, dedicated to marine monitoring. Early on, I joined oceanographic campaigns four times a year, often a month at sea each time. Doing that while raising young children was one of the toughest parts of my career, and I was only able to keep going thanks to real partnership at home—my husband, also a scientist, shared responsibilities equally.

Step by step, I progressed from research into scientific management. In 2021, I became the first woman Director of the Málaga Oceanographic Centre in its more than 110-year history. In January 2024, I was appointed General Director of the Spanish Institute of Oceanography, the first woman researcher from the institution to hold this role. Today I lead an organisation of nearly 1,000 people across 10 oceanographic centres, managing a fleet of five research vessels and five aquaculture facilities, and advising the Spanish government on marine issues. Internationally, I've represented the IEO in the European Marine Board and contributed to ocean literacy and communication networks. And because visibility matters, I joined the Océánicas: Women and Oceanography project and helped organise the first meeting to address the challenges women face in marine science.

My Advice

Most of the journey is difficult, and some situations are unpleasant, but the key is to keep trying—step by step, again and again. Not all of us will reach the exact outcome we hope for, but persistence matters, and it opens doors for those who come next.

"Everything seems impossible until it is done."

Nelson Mandela



Maria Gómez Ballesteros

Deputy Vice President of Organization, Spanish National Research Council (IEO-CSIC)



Vertigo, Volcanoes, and Voyages: Rising to the Top of Marine Research

After high school, I dreamed of studying architecture, but I didn't get the grades I needed. I chose geology as a "temporary" plan, thinking I would switch after a year—until I fell in love with understanding the planet and stayed for the full five-year degree. That detour is what eventually carried me to the Ocean.

In my final year, unsure where I belonged professionally, I was offered the chance to join Spain's leading oceanographic research vessel. That first campaign changed everything. I joined the Spanish Institute of Oceanography and, since then, I've taken part in more than 80 marine research projects, co-authored over 100 publications, and travelled from Antarctica to the Caribbean. The sea has given me unforgettable moments—like witnessing lava meeting the Ocean during the La Palma volcano eruption.

Over time, I moved from research fellow to leading teams, and later became Head of the Marine Environment and Conservation Area and Deputy Director of the largest marine research institute in my country. I've represented Spain in international forums and served on UN commissions, advising on the Blue Economy with the best scientific knowledge we can offer.

It hasn't been easy. Funding is a constant battle, and the field is competitive. As a woman and a mother of four, balancing family life with long, demanding cruises has sometimes slowed my progress. Many expeditions were with predominantly male crews—yet I felt welcomed and respected, and those months at sea shaped me.

My Advice

Don't wait for the "perfect moment." Build opportunities with passion, commitment, and vision. Fear is normal, and sometimes our worst enemy is our own doubt. But courage means facing it. The vertigo lasts only while you think—then the work begins, step by step. Breaking glass ceilings is necessary.

"For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Nelson Mandela



Maria Honig

WWF Coastal Communities Initiative Lead at WWF Mediterranean



Empowering Coastal Communities for Ocean Health

I lead WWF's global efforts to enhance the resilience of coastal communities. With a background in marine biology and expertise in social change theory, I focus on amplifying the recognition of coastal communities as central to ocean conservation. These communities, deeply connected to the sea for their livelihoods, possess invaluable knowledge about the Ocean's rhythms and conditions. WWF has been fortunate to have spent decades working alongside these communities, co-creating projects that meet their aspirations while safeguarding their natural resources.

In 2020, I took on the leadership of WWF's Coastal Communities Initiative. Since then, I've had the privilege of seeing the impact of our work across 33 countries. Our initiative is about more than just policies and advocacy—it's a call to action. We've worked tirelessly to strengthen ocean governance, amplify local voices, and integrate local solutions into policies. I am proud of two milestones that have elevated our collective cause including the launch of two impact reports showing the significant contribution of over 2000 communities to GBF KM targets and Paris Climate Agreement at COP16 and COP30 respectively. The reports demonstrate global efforts to tackle biodiversity loss and climate change and build a new era of community-driven conservation. Looking forward, the scale of the ambition matches the scale of the challenges, but I remain hopeful about what we can achieve together.

Throughout my career, I've faced challenges that pushed me to think creatively, especially around funding and capacity gaps. To overcome these, I worked on the enabling conditions for coastal communities to access finance and built multi-partner knowledge-sharing mechanisms. Connecting local advocacy efforts to global change has also been a key challenge. But through collaboration and the creation of platforms to support coastal communities in the Blue Economy, we've been able to make a real difference.

My Advice

Study a blue subject that inspires action and stick with it.



"If we invest in more sustainable aquaculture, we will achieve the first step towards a Blue Economy that respects biodiversity and produces high quality food."



Maria Isabel Saez Casado
Senior Lecturer of Almería University



From Lab to Fish Farm: Patenting Nano-Vaccine Feed for Sustainable Aquaculture

My journey in the Blue Economy has been shaped by scientific research, innovation, and turning knowledge into practice. With a PhD in Agricultural Engineering from the University of Almería, I've dedicated my career to aquaculture—a sector that matters for sustainable food production and global food security. For me, research only reaches its full value when it can be applied, helping the sector grow responsibly.

My work focuses on developing alternative, sustainable aquafeeds, addressing environmental challenges linked to intensification, and improving the nutritional quality of aquaculture products. Through several EU-funded projects, I've worked at the intersection of research and technology transfer, turning results into solutions the industry can use. One of my most innovative contributions has been developing a nanoencapsulated vaccine feed, designed to overcome the challenges of oral vaccine administration in early-stage farmed fish. This work resulted in a patented product and manufacturing process.

Because I care about bridging science and industry, I co-founded Lifebioencapsulation S.L., a technology-based spin-off developing natural additives and functional feeds to support a more sustainable, nutritious, and climate-resilient aquaculture sector. I also coordinate the Campus of International Excellence of the Sea at the University of Almería, a marine-maritime research network connecting universities, research centres, and businesses across Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and the Caribbean. Alongside this, I lead the aquaculture research line in ThinkinAzul in Andalusia, supporting the development of precision aquaculture for sustainable growth.

Balancing teaching, research, entrepreneurship, and outreach has not been simple. I've faced the pressure of competing for a permanent academic position while raising two young children. Still, with resilience, dedication, and careful time management, I've continued to publish, lead projects, and contribute to real-world impact.

My Advice



Stay persistent and passionate. Keep training and stay close to the latest science, build strong networks, and collaborate across disciplines. Don't hesitate to ask for support—especially when balancing career and motherhood. Be bold, trust your potential, and lead with your values.

"Growth begins at the edge of your comfort zone."



Marina Loizidou

Scientist at Cyprus Marine and Maritime Institute

Cyprus



Decarbonisation with Data, Compliance—and Blockchain

My background is in mathematics, statistics, and finance, an area I dedicated seven years to before making a bold career shift into research and innovation in the Blue Economy. This transition was driven by my desire to contribute to sustainability and meaningful change in a field where I could truly make an impact.

Gaining credibility and deep knowledge in this new domain required continuous learning and humility. Rather than allowing these challenges to become obstacles, I embraced them. I have worked to understand the complexities of the sector, sought mentorship, collaborated with experts, and applied my skills in data science, project management, and strategy. This blend of persistence, openness, and adaptability has allowed me to grow and make a positive impact in the Blue Economy.

Over the last two and a half years, I've worked as a scientist, combining data science, proposal writing, and project management. This has given me a broad perspective on both the technical and strategic aspects of marine and maritime research. Together with my team, I've contributed to advancing projects that promote digital transformation, sustainability, and international collaboration. One project I coordinate focuses on decarbonisation in the maritime sector, which takes a unique, integrated approach—developing advanced tools for emissions data management, regulatory compliance, and blockchain-enabled data integrity. This project bridges cutting-edge technology with the real-world needs of the maritime industry.

My Advice

Don't be afraid to change paths or step outside your comfort zone—that's where growth happens and where you'll find your voice. Every lesson you've learned and every skill you already have will come forward when you need it most. With each challenge, you'll become stronger, smarter, and more resilient. Your courage opens doors for others, and you always have something meaningful to contribute. And, most importantly for women: Don't be afraid to take the lead, even in spaces where women are underrepresented. Your courage opens doors for others.

"Excellence is built quietly, with effort, reflection, and the will to improve."



Marta Miquel

Deputy Director General at Escola Europea

Spain



Opening the Port Gates: Training Talent and Elevating Women's Voices

I've dedicated my career to creating inclusive educational programmes that empower new generations, especially women, to lead the maritime transition. Coming from a non-nautical background, I entered the male-dominated maritime sector with a vision to make my mark. Over the years, I've led initiatives in green shipping, intermodal logistics, and port community cooperation. I also coordinate the Port of Barcelona's Training and Employment working group, linking education, companies, and institutions to create meaningful career pathways for young professionals, and, together with the Escola Europea's team, I supported the creation of the Port Virtual Lab, a simulator of real port operations that it is now being used worldwide.

My commitment to building a well-trained generation of maritime professionals is at the core of my work. I believe talent is defined not just by background, but by adaptability, collaboration, and leadership with purpose. I mentor students, contribute to public-private partnerships, and ensure women's voices are represented in various forums. I'm proud to contribute to a more inclusive, resilient Blue Economy and to inspire others to do the same.

One of my biggest challenges was transitioning into the maritime sector from a different field. I had to quickly learn the industry's complexities, build credibility, and propose innovative solutions for training and talent development. Motivating companies to see talent development as an investment rather than a cost was another hurdle. Through consistent dialogue, concrete results, and pilot actions, we built a shared vision that secured engagement from all stakeholders.

My Advice

The Blue Economy needs diverse minds, skills, and experiences to grow sustainably. Don't wait until you feel "ready"—start, learn, ask questions, and stay curious. Confidence will follow. Surround yourself with inspiring people, collaborate across disciplines, and propose bold ideas. Progress takes time, but showing up every day and staying aligned with your values makes the real impact. But most importantly, support other women, celebrate their successes, and build networks that shape a fairer, more inclusive Blue Economy.

"Energy projects are never only technical; they're also about people, voices, and who gets included."



Natalia Rojas

Project Manager at Aquatera Atlántico

Spain



Offshore Renewable Energy Consultant

As an islander, the sea—with its tides, waves, currents, flora, and fauna—shapes my identity and worldview. It is a space I inhabit, and that inhabits me. I feel fear, fascination, and deep respect for it. Its energy once seemed chaotic and untameable, and I never imagined I would dedicate my career to marine and offshore renewable energy, as I have for the past 12 years.

I am a civil engineer specialised in marine renewables, and I am currently pursuing a degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology to better integrate social sciences into offshore energy projects. My goal is to ensure these developments are socially responsible, inclusive, and aligned with local contexts.

I have worked on complex blue energy projects and previously in construction, always highlighting broader social challenges—especially gender inequality. I led two blue energy roadmaps in Peru and Colombia, where technical ambition went hand in hand with inclusion and representation. Energy transitions must not overlook the people behind them and their voices.

Working in a male-dominated sector brings challenges, but I choose to speak openly about the gender gap and promote women's visibility. I am now developing a high school outreach programme to show young women these careers are possible. My advice is simple: the sea should never be a barrier. We have been overcoming obstacles all our lives—and this is no different.

My Advice

Don't let the challenges of working at sea hold you back—if you're drawn to it, go for it, because you've already learned how to clear obstacles your whole life.

”That’s life”



Paschalina Giatsiatso

Maritime Archaeologist at Cyprus Marine and Maritime Institute

Cyprus



Bridging the Gap Between Underwater Heritage and Innovation

My journey into Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH) began with a deep-rooted passion for archaeology. After graduating in 2015 and completing my MA in Maritime Archaeology in 2019, I shifted my focus to UCH and the unique challenges of underwater sites. As a Maritime Archaeologist, fieldwork required sel certifications, which I pursued alongside my studies—first as a Commercial Diver in Denmark, then as a Scientific Diver in Greece, and now as a Technical Diver in Cyprus.

Driven by my passion for fieldwork, I participated in underwater excavations and surveys, expanding my knowledge of modern shipwrecks and UCH sites. However, Maritime Archaeology goes beyond diving. Through EU-funded projects such as BLUEMED, MeDryDive, MareBoX, and THETIDA, I've explored the management of UCH sites, their accessibility via virtual diving experiences, and their protection via emerging monitoring systems. During this time, I also helped launch Knowledge Awareness Centres, such as the Digital Spot in Skopelos, Greece - initiatives that raised public awareness of UCH.

Currently, I work with the Cyprus Marine and Maritime Institute (CMMI), where I collaborate across Blue Economy sectors to explore how innovative technologies support sustainable UCH management. These interdisciplinary efforts have allowed me to act as a bridge between the public and the field, enhancing communication, engagement, and the preservation of our underwater heritage.

One of the biggest challenges I've faced, is making UCH more accessible and understandable. This field is often overlooked—not only by the public but also by other sectors. Through participatory work and innovation, I am committed to changing that perception and demonstrating that UCH deserves greater recognition and interdisciplinary engagement.

My Advice



With steady steps and persence, one can reach their goals successfully.



"I have not failed, I have just found 10,000 ways that will not work."

Thomas Edison



Paula Souto

R&D Manager at JEALSA Corporation

Spain



Closing the Loop: Turning Marine By-Products into High-Value Solutions

Since the beginning of my career, I've been deeply involved in R&D linked to the Blue Economy. With a background in chemistry, mechanical engineering, and physics, I've made environmental sustainability and the circular economy the pillars of my work. In recent years, my focus has been the valorisation of marine by-products from aquaculture, factories, and fisheries, aiming to create transversal solutions that benefit the wider community, not just a single industry.

I currently work as an R&D Manager in a multinational company connected to fishing and production, while pursuing a PhD in chemical engineering. My research focuses on developing more environmentally friendly processes using "green" solvents that are low in toxicity and highly recyclable and biodegradable—what I see as completing a missing piece in the sustainability puzzle. One of my proudest achievements has been studying the properties of marine by-products and discards to help close the loop in how marine raw materials are used. This work has helped ensure that 100% of resources can be exploited by improving ingredient quality and identifying new applications, opening commercial opportunities in pharmaceutical, nutraceutical, cosmetic, and food uses.

My journey hasn't been without challenges. One of the hardest parts is working without immediate results—starting from scratch, testing, failing, and sometimes returning to square one with no clear answers. Economic constraints can also stop progress: I've reached final project stages only to pause because funding ran out. And even when solutions are ready, bureaucracy and unclear regulatory frameworks can delay implementation and make progress feel impossible. Still, these struggles have never held me back. They've taught me resilience and adaptability, moving forward step by step, even when the path is slow or uncertain.

My Advice

Don't let setbacks discourage you. Keep going, even in the darkest moments—there is always a way forward. Change takes time, but it's always worth it. Surround yourself with supportive mentors and allies, and trust that every lesson you've learned will matter when you need it most.

"Small gestures
make big
achievements."



Pilar Zorzo

Marine Biologist at National Parks Autonomous Agency



From "One Grain of Sand" to International Action on Marine Litter

Since I was a child, I have been in love with the sea, and I have always had a clear vocation for caring for nature. This passion led me to study biology, specialising in marine biology, and for over 30 years, I've focused on the impact of human activities on the marine environment, striving to make economic and social development compatible with protecting the sea.

I've always worked with motivation and enthusiasm, and with the full conviction that what I do serves a purpose, that my grain of sand contributed to creating a great mountain. Moreover, I am a sociable and dynamic person, and thanks to this I have created a large network of people among whom I am an example and a point of reference in the protection of our environment. A culmination of this work has been the establishment of the MARLICE International Forum, organised by the Spanish Marine Litter Association, which I have led since its inception in 2015. The forum serves as a multi-sector platform to tackle the marine litter problem.

My proudest achievements include founding the Spanish Marine Litter Association, representing Spain in international marine litter fora like the European Commission's MSFD Technical Group on Marine Litter, and OSPAR and Barcelona Conventions.

One of the greatest challenges I face is defending the conservation of the marine environment, communicating its importance, and advising on the compatibility of economic and social development with the protection of our seas. It's a complex task, but I remain committed to raising awareness and finding solutions to preserve our oceans for future generations.

My Advice

Let them work and fight for what they believe in and be an example of life.

"Learn as much as you can and respect the Ocean, act with passion for it, consider the Ocean (and its ecosystems) as a person."



Raphaëla le Gouvello

Independent Consultant (IUCN, EU) and Founder of RespectOcean

France

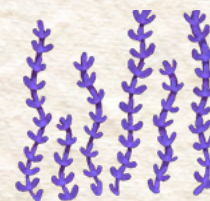


Pioneering the Regenerative Blue Economy

I have spent much of my career working on coastal marine ecosystems, focusing on the sustainability of marine activities such as aquaculture and coastal fisheries. My journey in research led me to pursue a PhD in circular economy applied to coastal socio-ecosystems. In 2024, I authored the IUCN report, "Towards a Regenerative Blue Economy (RBE)," and I'm now working on how to apply RBE principles globally. I am also advocating for the RBE, proposing it as a motion for the upcoming IUCN Congress in 2025.

In addition to my academic pursuits, I've led projects to advance sustainability in the marine sector, including my work at RespectOcean, an NGO I founded to reconcile ocean protection with economic activities. One of the most defining moments of my life was crossing three oceans solo on my Ocean sailboard between 2000 and 2006. With no prior offshore sailing experience, I became the only person in history to achieve this feat—no man or woman has done it before.

Starting my thesis in economics at 53, with no academic background in the field, and founding an NGO to drive change, were significant challenges that proved to me that persistence and passion can open doors.



My Advice



Act with passion for the Ocean, believe in yourself, listen to the others and adopt an ecosystemic approach, while also taking care of the people.

"The best way to predict the future is to create it."

Peter Drucker



Rocío Díaz Pereira

Director of La Lonja Tech

Spain



Turning Huelva's Port into a Startup Testbed for Blue Innovation

Since childhood, the sea has been my refuge. Growing up in Huelva, where the beach and port are part of our identity, I never imagined that my professional career would merge my passion for the sea with innovation and technology. I studied Industrial Engineering because I was fascinated by problem-solving, efficiency, and process improvement. My journey began in large industries, where I worked on project planning, cost control, and management, but I felt something was missing: real impact.

Everything changed in 2022, when I was offered the opportunity to lead La Lonja de la Innovación, a pioneering accelerator created by the Port Authority of Huelva and Telefónica to drive digital transformation in the logistics-port sector. Stepping into this role meant leaving my comfort zone, moving from industrial project management to supporting startups, and driving technological innovation in a traditional industry. The transition wasn't easy—I had to convince stakeholders that digitalisation was more than a trend but a key to sustainability. But when startups began piloting solutions in the port, improving energy efficiency, optimising logistics, and reducing environmental impact, I knew the effort had been worth it.

At La Lonja, I have worked to make this space more than just an incubator—a real-world testing ground where startups can validate their solutions. Seeing the Port of Huelva emerge as a leader in blue innovation, while also helping shape international conversations around sustainability and digitalisation, has been one of the most fulfilling aspects of this journey. But beyond technology, what I value most is the power of collaboration—when we share knowledge, embrace bold ideas, and support each other, we can truly transform the maritime sector into a greener, more efficient, and more human industry.

My Advice

I would advise you to trust your vision—this sector is wide open, and your perspective can genuinely shape what comes next. Don't try to do it alone: the breakthroughs that matter most usually happen through collaboration, strong networks, and partners who challenge and complement your ideas. And stay curious. Keep learning new tools, technologies, and approaches, because continuous learning is what will keep you relevant—and confident—in a Blue Economy that changes fast.

”Be the change
you want to see
in the World”

Mahatma Gandhi



Simona Paolacci

Head of Research and Development Department at
AquaBioTech Group



Duckweed, Determination, and a Life by the Sea

I have always been drawn to the water. As a child, I was fascinated by marine life, spending hours observing the underwater world. I wanted to study marine biology, but with no programme available in Rome and limited financial resources, I chose Environmental Sciences instead. After university, I applied for PhDs in marine biology but was told my background wasn't suitable. Undeterred, in 2011, I moved to Cork (Ireland) and began a PhD in plant ecophysiology, working with aquatic plants.

During my research, I discovered the potential of duckweed for water purification, which became my passion. I submitted a proposal to develop a duckweed-based remediation system for aquaculture effluents. My first two funding attempts were unsuccessful, but on my third try, I secured support from Bord lascaigh Mhara, leading to the first duckweed-based water treatment system in Ireland (and possibly Europe). This opened new doors—I began working with rainbow trout and perch and researching how duckweed could replace soy in aquafeeds.

After 12 years in Ireland, I returned to the Mediterranean, where I now lead the research department of a Malta-based consultancy specialising in aquaculture and marine biology. I manage my own research team and multiple EU-funded projects, focusing on sustainable aquaculture. I don't know if I'm an inspiration, but I feel privileged to do what I love. My work keeps me learning, solving problems, and pushing boundaries—like being a student forever. And best of all, I live by the sea.



My Advice



Follow your love for the sea and really listen to it. Work hard, and don't let closed doors define what you can do next. And if you reach a managerial position, don't lock yourself in the office—make time for fieldwork and the lab. Stay close to the practical work, because that's what keeps the fire alive.

*"No water, no life.
No blue, no green."*

Sylvia Earle



Sonia Hurtado

CEO and Co-founder of Poseidona

Spain



Turning Novel Resources into Essential Nutrients

I'm a food scientist focused on extracting nutrients from novel resources, including recovered seaweeds and invasive algae. My mission is to re-balance and protect marine ecosystems while reducing fish and animal exploitation for food. I'm dedicated to changing the food system to make it more ethical and sustainable.

I co-founded Kuleana - Current Foods Inc. and developed an award-winning plant-based raw tuna. I also co-founded Poseidona with Dr. Maria Cermeño, where we are working tirelessly to nourish everyone with our seaweed-based ingredients. In addition, I've advised and collaborated with multiple companies developing alternative seafood, contributing to product development in world leading alternative seafood and meat companies.

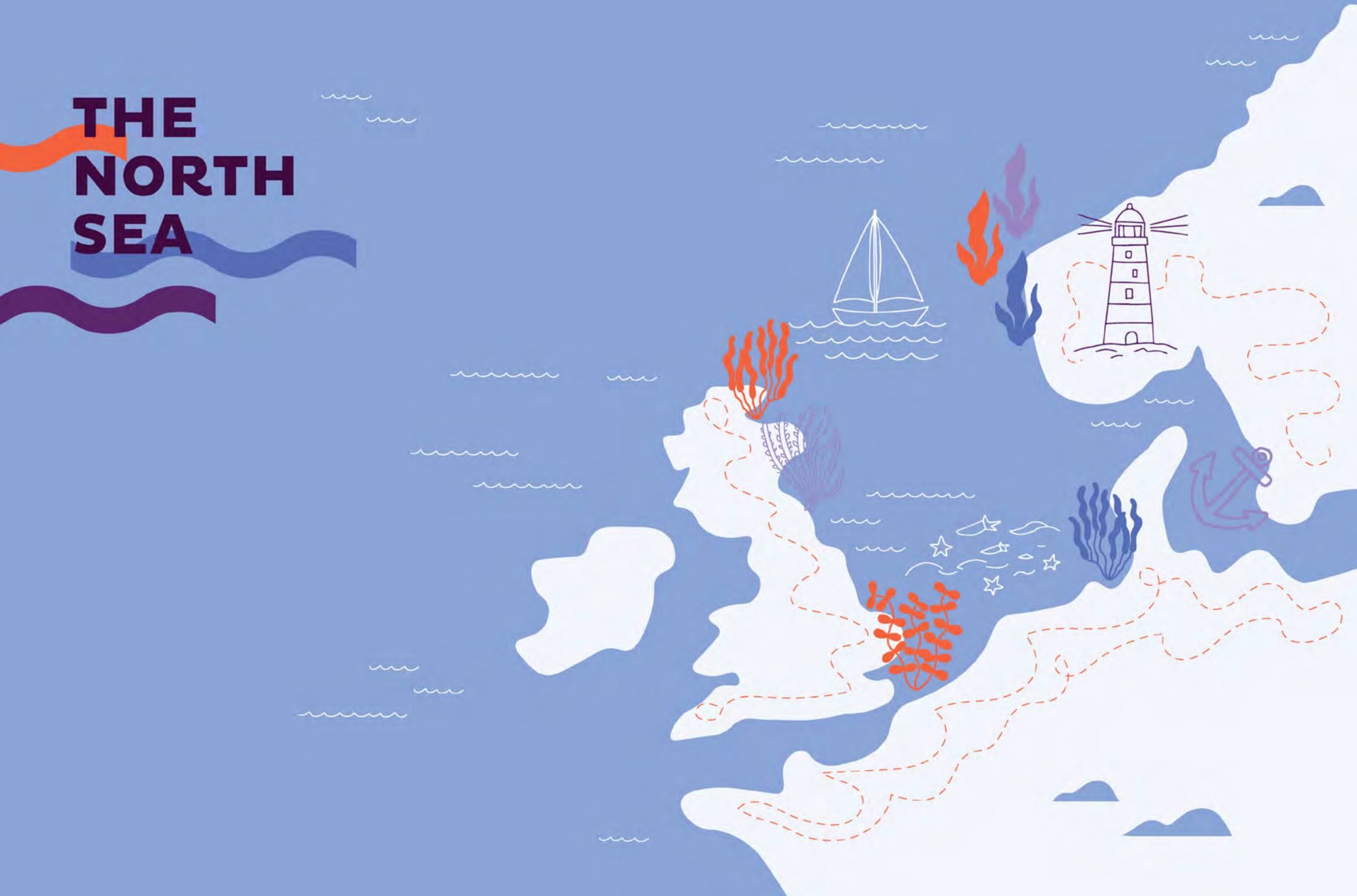
One of the biggest challenges I've faced is being a single mother of two while managing an intense career that goes beyond earning a salary—it's a true mission. Although my brother and parents have supported me during my travels, they live far away, and there have been times when it was difficult to keep going. I missed many opportunities, but I've learned to handle it all through resilience and support from loved ones.



My Advice

Do what makes you feel authentic and fully yourself—no apologies needed.

THE NORTH SEA



"Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass; it's about learning to dance in the rain"

Vivian Greene



Agnieszka Kempny

Project Manager at CINEA - European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency

Belgium



Guiding Blue Economy practices from Europe's Policy Centre

Growing up in the breathtaking Beskidy Mountains of Poland, I harboured a lifelong dream of living by the sea. Though far from the coast, I felt an undeniable connection to the Ocean and a fascination with life below water. This passion guided my path—from studying hotel management in a vibrant tourist town to earning a degree in journalism and international relations at Warsaw University, and later taking leadership roles in tourism and hospitality in Dublin.

In 2011, I moved to Brussels to transition into the public sector, where I joined the European Institutions. From an administrative assistant to a project manager in climate action and maritime policy, my career has been driven by a desire to make a broader impact. Today, I proudly serve at the Sustainable Blue Economy Unit within the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency. I guide EU-funded projects promoting gender equality, digitalisation, eco-tourism, ocean literacy, blue careers, and coastal community resilience.

One of my proudest achievements has been the successful transition from the private to public sector, managing EU-funded projects for nine years and being involved in grants and public procurement in the European Commission.

I faced challenges such as adapting quickly to different countries and starting my EU career from a lower level. But persistence, hard work, and continuous learning helped me overcome these hurdles.

My Advice

Follow your passion and trust your unique perspective. The Blue Economy thrives on innovation, resilience, and diverse voices—especially women's voices. Build your expertise confidently, seek out mentors, and don't be afraid to take on challenges outside your comfort zone. Progress often requires persistence and adaptability. Remember, your contribution matters—both for your career and for shaping a sustainable future for our oceans and communities. Stay curious, stay courageous.

"Help them to do it themselves."

Maria Montessori



Anne Boermans

Business Founder of Zeefier

The Netherlands



Innovating for Sustainable Textile Dyeing

I believe in the power of the Ocean to transform the textile industry sustainably. At Zeefier, we've created an innovative seaweed-based dye—an alternative to synthetic dyes that is natural, non-toxic, and scalable. Our dye tackles one of fashion's biggest pollution challenges and demonstrates that aesthetics, sustainability, and innovation can coexist. Seaweed, a raw material that grows naturally in the Ocean, is central to our approach and a daily reminder of why we must rethink how we use natural resources.

Founding Zeefier from scratch wasn't easy. Disrupting the textile industry with biotechnology required persistence, creativity, and resilience. We faced challenges such as industry resistance, educating the market about eco-friendly solutions, and developing a sustainable business model. Winning the Blue Bio Value Prize 2023 was a milestone that validated our approach, helped attract investors, and opened doors to key industry partners. One of my proudest achievements is the introduction of a woollen carpet dyed entirely with our seaweed-based pigment, showing that sustainable materials can transform traditional textile processes.

As a female entrepreneur in a male-dominated space, I've learned the importance of building a strong network, mentoring others, and letting results speak for themselves. The journey has reinforced my belief that small, consistent actions—driven by passion, vision, and determination—can create meaningful change.

My Advice

Don't wait for the perfect moment. Take the first step, persist through challenges, surround yourself with supportive allies, and embrace every opportunity to make an impact. The industry needs bold, innovative thinkers, and there's always room for those ready to challenge the status quo. Surround yourself with supportive people, stay persistent, and remember that small actions lead to meaningful change.

"Follow your dreams"



Belinda Bramley
Blue Economy Consultant

United Kingdom



Turning Financial Expertise into Ocean Protection

I've always loved nature and the stories it tells us, and it was inevitable that I would find a way to dedicate my career to protecting it. I began my career training as an accountant, then spent a decade in investment banking. While intellectually stimulating and financially rewarding, I felt unfulfilled. One day, I saw a job with an environmental NGO, and the impact they were making on conservation inspired me to leave the City of London, take a big pay cut, and switch to working for NGOs. Some of the financial problem-solving was just as complex, but the rewards were beyond measure.

After a decade in the NGO sector, I became an independent Blue Economy consultant. I had fallen in love with the Ocean world and realised how neglected it was in conservation terms. My career now allows me to work with scientists, policymakers, NGOs and communities, helping to protect our oceans. One of my proudest achievements was when former Seychelles President James Alix Michel asked me to review his second book on the Blue Economy, after his first book had so inspired me. I loved my work in Seychelles, where I co-created a joint grant scheme and visiting fellowships to support local marine scientists explore the deep waters around Seychelles.

Now I co-lead Stakeholder Engagement for the MPA Europe project, which is a highly impactful project. Recently, I co-founded The Protected Areas Foundation in the UK to support coastal communities, a new venture I'm excited about. Despite my success, I've faced challenges, including battling imposter syndrome and finding where I can best contribute in the Blue Economy. I've learned that impostor syndrome and questioning myself is a good thing, and that collaboration is key to success. With each opportunity, I gain more confidence in my ability to create change.

My Advice

Find your tribe. Surrounding yourself with like minds is really important for maintaining self-belief in the value you can bring, and in keeping you positive through difficult times.

"The Ocean doesn't start at the coast, it starts at the top of the mountains."



Bodil Sofie Espersen
Head of outreach at Havhøst

Denmark



Regenerative Ocean Farming into Floating Classrooms

For the past 10 years I have worked to promote regenerative ocean farming, starting in Copenhagen, Denmark and gradually expanding nationally and internationally. My focus has always been on developing educational programmes that engage young people and get them involved in rethinking our blue food systems through regenerative practices. Always using food, flavour and hands-on curiosity-driven activities as the main tool and the ambition to reconnect Danes to the Ocean—a connection that has been lost over time. Together with an amazing team we have taught students as well as teachers and reached over 10,000 people through these initiatives.

Regenerative ocean farming is about more than just food production; it's about restoring the Ocean while cultivating sustainable foods like mussels, seaweed, and oysters. The goal is to give back to the Ocean more than we take, and to invite these ocean wonders into our food culture.

One of my proudest achievements has been developing a floating classroom in Copenhagen, where over 1,000 local students visit each year to learn about regenerative farming, ocean ecosystems and future foods. We've expanded this initiative to 22 other Danish locations through "train the trainers" programmes, further spreading the message of sustainable ocean farming. Despite the challenges, such as constantly seeking funding and political setbacks, I remain driven by the vision.

My Advice

Don't keep your ideas to yourself. Share them with anyone willing to listen, get them excited, get them invested. Start small, experiment, fail, and try again. The idea and the process does not need to be perfect. It just needs to start.

"Every voice matters
- trust your path,
build connections,
and shape the future
together."



Cecilie Petersen

Research impact and policy manager at the University of Southern Denmark

Denmark



Building Unconventional Paths

I come from a family with no academic tradition, and my journey has been anything but conventional. Moving in and out of academia, I carved my own path, navigating disciplines and industries that rarely intersect. Today, I work in research support, a role that many don't even know exists, helping to drive innovation and knowledge-based decision-making in the Blue Economy. My work bridges science, policy, community engagement, with the aim of creating real-world impact - proving that meaningful contributions don't always follow traditional routes. I hope my journey inspires others to explore unconventional careers and embrace the power of interdisciplinary thinking in shaping a sustainable future.

After completing my master's in marine biology, I worked with NGOs on marine protection and conservation and supported Denmark's largest retailer in shifting to sustainable seafood. I then returned to academia, earning a PhD in marine ecology, before joining a think tank focused on marine policy. Today, in my current role, I support the implementation of Mission Ocean in Denmark, including organising the conference during the Danish EU Presidency. Through these experiences, I have consistently worked to combine knowledge and cross-sector collaboration to advance the sustainable use of our Ocean resources.

However, I have faced my fair share of challenges. Gaining respect as a young professional in a male-dominated field was difficult, as youth perspectives were often overlooked. The lack of structured training for careers at the research-policy intersection made navigating this alternative path challenging. I overcame these obstacles by building networks, seeking mentorship, and proving the value of human and interdisciplinary skills in shaping the Blue Economy.

Believe in your expertise and make your voice heard, even in spaces where it's not always welcomed. Build strong networks, support other women and minorities, and seek mentors with diverse perspectives. The Blue Economy needs innovative, interdisciplinary, and diverse thinkers - trust your path and shape the future on your own terms.

"Be authentic, stay true to yourself and walk the talk. The rest will follow together."



Charlotte Jagot

*Head of Sector Marine Resources and Ocean Governance,
CINEA - European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment
Executive Agency*

Belgium



Empowering Women, Advancing International Governance

I think my story may help those who feel they don't have the "right" background for the Blue Economy. My path was far from typical. I got my first marine research job by taking a chance, even though I didn't fully match the profile. I fell in love with the work, learning on the job with world-class scientists through IFREMER's European partnerships. That's when I knew I wanted a career in ocean research.

I started as a junior with a two-year contract almost 20 years ago. Today, I lead a team in an executive agency of the European Commission, managing studies, projects, and contracts to improve scientific advice and international ocean governance. Along the way, I've worked on topics that align with my values: gender equality, blue bioeconomy, and ocean literacy. I'm particularly proud of the "Women in the Blue Economy" call for proposals, supporting greater inclusion in the sector.

Of course, I've also had difficult times at work—being destabilised by either management or colleagues. I've felt overwhelmed by the workload, disappointed, and full of doubts. I struggled to set clear boundaries or keep a proper work-life balance, and I've realised that this is a lifelong challenge, which may never be fully won. But I've learned through personal growth to be vigilant to my own needs, and over time, I've embraced the hard lessons that came from those moments of vulnerability. I feel now much stronger and self-aware and in a position to lead with empathy.

Since 2024, my challenge is leading a team on scientific advice for fisheries and international ocean governance, focusing on implementing the BBNJ (Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction) Agreement—a complex but vital mission.



Don't fear being authentic or speaking up. Don't let stereotypes or doubts dictate your journey. Pursue what interests you, network, ask questions, and stay curious. Keep pushing your limits and measure success by staying true to your values and vision. You are where you are because of your effort, and no one is better placed than you for this role. Don't let perfection hold you back—every step matters, and the Ocean needs passionate, diverse minds to lead the way.

“Success is what follows when you follow yourself”



Claudia Busse-Uhrig

Founder & CEO of Viva Maris

Germany



Educating, Innovating, and Promoting Seaweed for a Healthier Future

My story is an inspiring example of how entrepreneurial action, environmental awareness, and innovation can be combined. In 2014, I founded Viva Maris GmbH with the goal of sensitising Western society to the diverse uses of seaweed. I recognised the potential of algae as a sustainable food source and sought to reintegrate it into Western food culture. My vision was to create algae products that are not only healthy but also contribute to the preservation of our oceans.

In addition to production, I am deeply committed to protecting the Oceans and promoting the blue bioeconomy. I engage in national and international research projects on algae and support sustainable cultivation practices. I also founded Mission Ozean, a non-profit organisation that focuses on marine education, especially for younger generations. Through this initiative, I aim to inspire the next wave of ocean advocates.

One of my proudest achievements has been successfully completing several international projects on algae. By making the products both accessible and appealing, I educated consumers about the potential of seaweed, making it mainstream in healthier, eco-conscious eating habits.

As a founder, I faced many challenges, particularly in introducing seaweed-based products into the market. Seaweed was unfamiliar in Western diets, but I overcame this by focusing on education and awareness, showing how versatile and health-beneficial seaweed could be.

My Advice

Never give up, there is always a solution!



"Find joy in little things;
a flower's bloom, a bird's song,
a butterfly's play, raindrops
clear, sunshine's embrace.
Find joy in little things,
and happiness will follow."



Froukje Maria Platjouw

Research leader at the Norwegian Institute for Water
Research (NIVA)

Norway



Balancing Ocean Governance, Personal Growth, and Resilience

I grew up with water as a major aspect of my life, often finding myself either in it, swimming, or on it, ice skating. To this day, the Ocean gives me a sense of calmness and perspective, reminding me of its beauty, power, and mystery. These feelings have guided my scientific journey and shaped my view of life. My law degrees and research focus on the role of law in better protecting and governing our coasts and oceans—doing something in return for all the Ocean has given me.

Success is often measured by achievements, but behind those achievements, there are often sacrifices and struggles that no one sees. Personally, I find strong women—those who have faced hardship but still stand with dignity—to be the most inspirational. Many of these women remain unseen, but they are vital to creating the space for change. That's why projects like WIN-BIG are so important. Women deserve to be valued, not just for big achievements, but for their resilience, growth, and contributions, even when they face challenges or take career breaks. We still need societal, organisational, and attitude-related changes to lift up women and allow them to flourish, and I hope to contribute to that by supporting the women around me.

Over the years, my career has been interrupted four times, mostly by maternity leaves and a lengthy period of caring for an ill child. These breaks are difficult, especially as the world and scientific field keep evolving in your absence. Returning to work means having to rebuild your expertise, but it's important to accept this and have faith that pieces of the puzzle will fall into place when the time is right.

My Advice

Have faith in your own worth, in every sense. Don't be discouraged when science moves faster than you can keep up. Dedicate your energy to valuable tasks and people, grow together, and avoid comparisons. Be patient, embrace setbacks as opportunities for growth, and stay humble. Understand that obstacles are part of your journey—embrace them as chances to develop skills that will make you more resilient. Finally, be your own inspiration. Make a plan for yourself, have backup plans, and learn from others' journeys without letting their successes intimidate you. Keep going.

"I never did it, so
I think I can do it"

Pippi Longstocking



Lina de Nijs

Fisheries Researcher at Pelagic Freezer Trawler
Association

The Netherlands

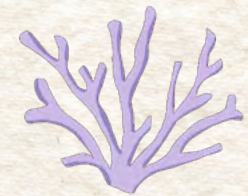


Breaking Barriers in the Dutch Pelagic Trawling Industry

I think of myself as an inspirational character because I'm the first, and still the only woman, working on the Dutch Pelagic Freezer Trawlers—factory vessels that catch, process, and store pelagic fish like herring, mackerel, and blue whiting onboard. These vessels, operated by about 45 men, typically have trips ranging from 3 to 6 weeks, and the work is demanding and physically tough.

When I was looking for a thesis project in fisheries research, I was told, "you can never join such vessels, you are a woman." That comment motivated me even more to prove them wrong, and in the summer of 2020, at just 21 years old, I joined a Dutch freezer trawler. I immediately fell in love with the industry. Everything was new to me: the research, the fisheries, life at sea, and the crew. I asked a lot of questions, probably some stupid ones, but they answered all of them happily, and I quickly felt at home.

It's a fully male-dominated world, but I've learned that while most fishermen may look tough, they have tiny hearts. I often earn their respect by working my hours, processing research fish by hand, and not being seasick in a force 12 storm. When different crews ask when I'll join their vessel again, that's when I know I'm truly part of the community.



My Advice

Be tough and guard your boundaries. It can take extra effort to prove your worth in this world, but once you do, it feels like home.

"The Ocean stirs the heart,
inspires the imagination and
brings eternal joy to the soul."

Wyland



Lissa Batey

Senior Marine Ecologist at NatureBureau

United Kingdom



Turning Passion into Legislation: Leading the Charge for Dolphin Protection

From a girl who loved dolphins to a marine conservation leader, I hope my journey inspires others. My passion for the Ocean began with studying bottlenose dolphins and researching basking sharks, whales, and porpoises off the UK coast. Early in my career, I taught at the University of Plymouth and engaged underprivileged youth with the natural environment.

At The Wildlife Trusts, I spent 15 years rising to Head of Marine Conservation, campaigning to protect our seas. I led efforts to designate and manage Marine Protected Areas, securing nature's recovery at sea. Now at NatureBureau, I lead marine and coastal projects, securing new business, and continue to advocate for our seas. I also advise both the Devon, and Antigua & Barbuda Environment Foundations and have recently joined the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas to influence the international stage for our oceans.

One of my proudest achievements is taking more than 371,000 signatures to the European Commission, leading to new legislation requiring pingers on fishing nets to stop dolphin bycatch. Another significant accomplishment was galvanising support for Marine Protected Areas and helping to secure three highly protected sites. It has also been incredibly rewarding to see former students progress in the marine sector and go on to influence change themselves.

Breaking into the marine sector was tough, especially when jobs were scarce. I often had to juggle different roles until I secured a full-time position. I encourage early career starters to be dedicated, tenacious, and keep pushing forward, even if it means starting with voluntary roles. Campaigning for policy change in the marine sector has its own hurdles, especially when governments change and priorities shift. It's frustrating when you have to start over with a new political party or minister, but persistence is key. I've learned to find middle ground and facilitate solutions between stakeholders with differing views, always listening and understanding their perspectives.

My Advice

Your passion for the Ocean is your greatest asset. Be undeniably competent in your field, build a strong network, seek mentors, and become one yourself. Cultivate resilience and confidence—believe in yourself. You've got this!

"The adventure and healthiness of the Ocean is more important than gender and traditions"



Louise Windelboe

Owner of Badass Seaweed Startup

Denmark



From Captain to Seaweed Entrepreneur

I've sailed the seven oceans for 20 years—as a deckhand, 1st officer, and eventually the first female captain. When I was 18, I wanted to see the world, and I chose the Ocean way. I applied to join the big sailing vessel *Georg Stage*, stayed onboard for six months, and then earned a trainee degree that let me sign on vessels in the merchant marine. That took me to Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, North Africa, and many other places.

Many vessels and oceans later, I earned my captain's degree and became the first female captain on a coaster with five nationalities onboard—of course as the only woman. On one route sailing Canada and Iceland, I was the only woman among 60 men from 16 different countries, and in charge of 30 of them. Later I landed on a big research vessel in the Arctic with 30 marine biologists onboard, and I spent all my time between duties in the laboratory.

Then came the moment that changed everything: working at a shipping company, I was shocked to learn how young people are taught it's "okay" to throw oil from ships into the water. That was the start of my company—Badass Seaweed. I wanted people to see what I saw under the surface. I truly believed that if they knew what kind of gold lies beneath, they would never pollute the Ocean.

I started by buying waders and running courses in seaweed exploration and harvesting. People then wanted to learn how to cook with seaweed, so I began seaweed cooking classes. Next, I wanted to grow seaweed myself, so I handmade a system to deploy into the water. I work closely with local fishermen, who also bring me seaweed from by-catch. Eventually, I opened a shop where I could sell seaweed products—and today, I earn a decent income working together with the Ocean.

I've learned that as a female navigator you often have to prove yourself all the time, whether it's physical strength or intelligence. So I worked harder—and I hope I helped show the way for other women who want to join the Blue Economy.

My Advice

Don't think working at sea is a matter of gender. Do it because you want the adventure, the experience, the career—and because you want to make a difference.

"Go with the flow in terms of your interests, but don't be afraid to go against the current if your environment tries to force you in directions you don't like."



Luca van Duren
Senior Scientist at DELTARES

The Netherlands



Connecting Disciplines to Shape the Blue Economy

I work on the impacts—both good and bad—of human activities on the marine environment. My background lies at the interface between physics and ecology, a unique position that has allowed me to collaborate with engineers, biologists, and other experts from various fields. It's this interdisciplinary approach that enables me to compile science from diverse sectors and communicate it effectively to various audiences, from civil servants and the general public to students at all levels—primary school to university.

In a recent conversation with a junior male colleague, when I asked how he would like to develop himself, his response was: "Like you." I couldn't have been more flattered!

One of my proudest achievements has been getting the impact of offshore wind on the lower levels of the marine food web on the agenda, not only with my scientific colleagues but also with the Dutch government. Similarly, I've worked to bring attention to the limitations of carrying capacity for low-trophic aquaculture, pushing for more realistic goals in offshore aquaculture with stakeholders.

While I've never felt that being female has hampered my progress in studying or being taken seriously as a scientist, my biggest challenges have always come from within. I'm fascinated by almost everything, and my tendency to get distracted can sometimes make time management a struggle. This has affected my work-life balance, but I've learned that talking to colleagues and line managers is essential. I'm lucky to have colleagues who keep an eye on me and help prevent me from overloading myself. Learning to listen to others has certainly helped me overcome this, though I admit, I still struggle with it at times.

My Advice

My advice to anyone starting out is simple: Go for it. Find your own niche, keep being inspired, and let the sea continually surprise and inspire you.

“Stay true to your vision but be adaptable”

Margriet Drouillon

Professor & Business Developer at the University of Ghent

Belgium



Pioneering blue innovation in Flanders

I have dedicated my career to bridging the gap between research and real-world impact in the Blue Economy. My work focuses on translating scientific knowledge into tangible economic opportunities by connecting academia, industry, and government. From envisioning offshore aquaculture in Flanders to strengthening the region's innovation ecosystem, my aim has consistently been to create structural and lasting change.

One of my proudest milestones was leading the strategic roadmap that resulted in the creation of Blue Cluster, positioning Flanders as a recognised hub for Blue Economy research and innovation and enabling the mobilisation of substantial R&D funding. I also initiated and coordinated the world's first offshore mussel farming project integrated into operational wind farms in the North Sea, demonstrating the feasibility of aquaculture in high-energy environments and paving the way for commercial deployment. Later, I secured €7 million in EU Recovery funding to launch MariFish Inc., Europe's first incubator and living lab for aquaculture and innovative fisheries start-ups.

This journey has come with significant challenges. Large-scale Blue Economy initiatives require complex public-private partnerships, blended finance, and risk-sharing mechanisms. Overcoming regulatory uncertainty, liability constraints, and the innovation “valley of death” has shaped my approach: combining de-risking strategies with strong interdisciplinary networks to move ideas toward market reality.

Looking ahead, I remain committed to advancing interdisciplinary collaboration and scaling innovation in the Blue Economy. Through the Chairs I hold—Marine Bio-Economy: from Research to Sustainable Business and Nature-based Solutions for Coastal Resilience—as well as through my teaching, where business cases play a central role, I will continue to connect science, finance, policy, and practice to accelerate sustainable blue growth.

My Advice

The Blue Economy thrives on multidisciplinary collaboration. Surround yourself with experts from science, finance, law, engineering, and policy. Embrace complexity and uncertainty—because innovation is built precisely where familiar paths end.

“What would nature do?
Begin and share!”



Marjanne Cuypers

CEO of BlueBlocks

The Netherlands



Seaweed-based Solutions in Construction

With a background in Industrial Design Engineering from Delft University of Technology, I became increasingly aware of the environmental impact of mass production, especially the materials and processes used. Determined to find a more sustainable alternative, I began researching eco-friendly resources and discovered the incredible potential of seaweed, particularly seaweed fibers from residues.

In 2020, I took the leap and left my job to dedicate myself fully to developing a toxin-free, natural paneling material made from seaweed and agricultural residues. I started experimenting in a rented lab space, refining the material through trial and error. Through collaborations with universities, architects, and experts in bio-chemistry and material science, I developed SeaWood Materials, a durable and eco-friendly alternative for interior construction.

Two years later, I found a like-minded co-founder, and together we expanded BlueBlocks. Now, we have opened our first factory as two female technicians, proving that women entrepreneurs can also drive innovation in the traditionally male-dominated construction and tech industries. My vision is a future where our built environment contributes to a healthier planet, both on land and in the Oceans, and I hope to inspire others to follow their beliefs

My Advice

Keep your vision as wide as the Ocean, and ride the waves one by one.

*"Always Both.
There is always another
option, another choice.
And we can choose both!"*



Morgan Ræ

Founding Designer of L'eautelier

Belgium



The road from waste through tourism and to hospitality

I grew up surrounded by water, with early memories of a mystical stream and a connection to water that would last a lifetime. From playing in the cool waters as a child to witnessing the harsh realities of waste and pollution, my relationship with water has shaped both my personal and professional life. As a child, I found ways to make the most of what I had — including picking up cigarette butts around a motel pool in exchange for swimming access during summer breaks. Those early experiences taught me about the impact of small actions, and how waste can accumulate if left unchecked.

My professional journey shifted toward ocean tourism and design after my time in hotels. In Tulum, Mexico, I witnessed firsthand the waste piling up along the beaches, including seaweed. Inspired by Ruth Kassinger's SLIME, I pivoted my brand, L'eautelier, into an algae-based design studio focused on sustainability in the travel and hospitality industries. By using algae, we're creating products that help address environmental issues while promoting eco-friendly tourism.

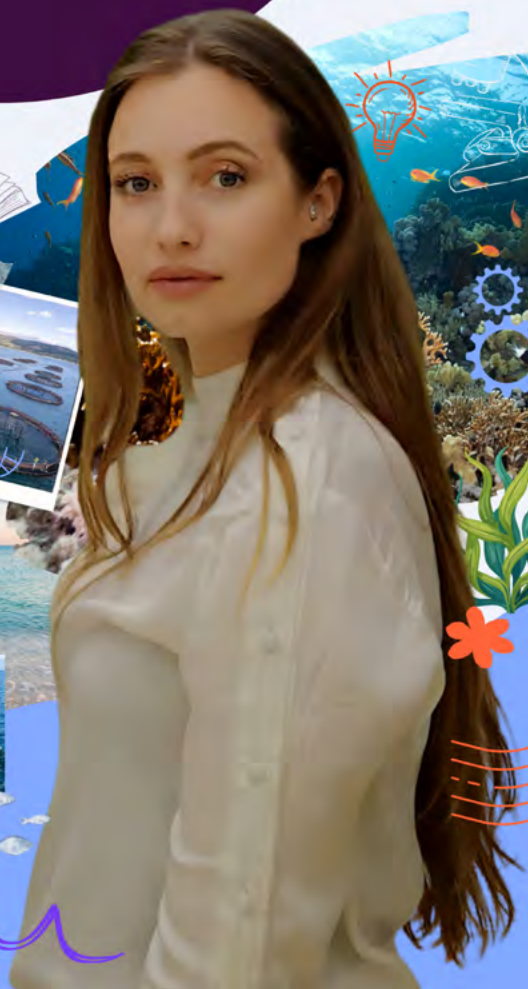
My achievements include being a Climate Launchpad finalist in 2023 and presenting at the UN Ocean Conference in 2022. I won Radical Innovation for the Float With Us project, a floating hotel with a regenerative coral garden beneath its guest suites. Through these projects, I aim to offer ocean-friendly solutions that blend sustainability with luxury, creating a regenerative transition in the industry.

However, my journey hasn't been without challenges. Throughout my career, I've faced financial fluctuations, and I've worked hard to find balance. At times, I was consumed by my work, neglecting personal time. But swimming and floating in water helped me find peace and reset my focus. It's those moments in nature that keep me grounded.

My Advice

The women in the Blue Economy are supportive. Seek mentors, attend conferences, and connect with others. Build relationships that uplift you, and don't hesitate to take on leadership roles in a field that needs diverse voices.

“Make softness
your gravity”



Rosalie Tukker

Senior Environmental and Climate Policy Advisor at
Landelijk Vlaanderen

Belgium



Dancing with the Sea: Bridging Policy, Passion, and People in the Blue Economy

I come from a country that lives below sea level — the Netherlands. Maybe that's why I've always felt a deep connection to water — not as something to control, but to dance with. I don't just work in the Blue Economy; I've lived it — I followed salt and wind. Before university, I lived in Ecuador and South Africa, where the sea teemed with blue marvels — think *Avatar: The Way of Water*. I earned my diving license in the small Galápagos, later found myself surrounded by whales and penguins in Antarctica, and just this past winter, swam alongside orcas in Arctic Norway. These moments left me awestruck — and reminded me that nature doesn't need us. We are small.

Trained as a marine governance specialist with a foundation in marine biology, today, I represent national fishing organisations in the EU — navigating the heart of policy-making for one of the world's oldest ocean sectors. It's a space dominated by suits and steel, but I believe there's strength in grace, and power in persistence. I've carried ballet point shoes into conferences — literally — to speak about balance, discipline, and the art of navigating wicked fields like the Blue Economy, one step at a time. Whether dancing between policy silos or swimming with giants, I like to think I move with conviction. I've built my career bridging hard hats and the soft skills — bringing science, industry, and emotion to the same table. I carry the voices of those too often left out of the sustainability conversation: fishers, coastal communities, and the people behind the scenes — often women.

My story isn't about conquering the sea — it's about listening to it. It's about creating space for more women to lead, dream, and dive in. If my journey proves anything: if you wait to be invited, you'll be waiting forever. So I bring a chair — and sometimes pointe shoes — and get to work.

My Advice

If you wait to be invited, you'll be waiting forever.

"My body is mine,
not me."



Sophie Coxon

Freelance Writer at Natucate & The Kingfisher

Scotland



From Writing to Diving: A Marine Scientist's Quest to Improve Restoration Practices

I have always been fascinated by marine ecosystems, and despite many challenges have never let go of my passion. I built my knowledge in marine ecology by seizing every opportunity—from volunteering in my university's coral lab to freelancing as a marine science writer. Using savings and grants, I earned my scientific diving qualification in Indonesia, contributing to shark and ray monitoring and coral nursery work. I've since conducted research in Scotland and Thailand, working to improve restoration practices at an ecosystem level. My latest project is in the Maldives, assessing fish communities related to coral restoration.

I've had significant achievements; a policy report I co-produced was instrumental in preventing development at a seagrass site, and my research in Scotland helped refine the local charity's approach to seagrass and oyster habitat restoration. My writing features in many prominent publications, connecting a global audience to the Ocean.

Despite these successes, the journey hasn't been easy. Financial constraints are a significant barrier—many research opportunities require self-funding, a reality that limits the projects I can engage in. Additionally, as a petite young woman, I've faced objectification and dismissal in academic and professional spaces. Whether at conferences or internships, I've been overlooked simply because of my appearance - but I continue to push forward, confident in my own competence and driven by my passion for marine conservation.



My Advice

Don't let someone else's opinion of you, your work, or your goals stop you. If you think you can do it, then you can.

"Success doesn't come from what you do occasionally, but from what you do consistently."



Vanessa Barzasi

CEO and Co-founder of BioBright

United Kingdom



Innovating with Algae: From Startup Challenges to International Expansion

As the co-founder and CEO of BioBright, a UK-based startup focused on sustainable algae-based solutions, I am committed to turning environmental challenges into impactful innovations. With a background in economics and anthropology, I've combined my passion for marine biodiversity and sustainability to develop technologies that reduce CO₂ emissions and water pollution in ports and coastal waters.

Starting a company at the age of 24, especially as a female founder in a male-dominated maritime industry, was no easy task. The challenges I faced required resilience, determination, and adaptability. Despite this, I secured significant funding, including a £60,000 place at the UCL Incubator and grants from Innovate UK and Catapult Connected Places, allowing BioBright to expand internationally to markets like Singapore, Canada, and Italy.

I've engaged with over 1,000 stakeholders across 70+ ports globally, showing the power of collaboration and persistent communication. Through BioBright, we not only innovate but also educate communities about the vital role algae play in environmental health, promoting green industry practices and transforming perceptions.

One of the biggest challenges I faced as a female founder under 30 was securing funding, as the investment landscape can be particularly tough for young women entrepreneurs. However, I learned that success comes from finding investors who truly believe in your vision. By building authentic relationships and demonstrating unwavering commitment, I overcame these barriers and secured the support needed for BioBright's growth.

My Advice

Believe in your vision and don't be afraid to speak up. The Blue Economy needs diverse voices and fresh ideas, so stay confident, build strong networks, and seek out mentors who genuinely support your growth. Remember, persistence and passion are your greatest assets

"This is your chance to take a stand and fix what is broken."



Willemijn Peeters

Founding Director at Searious Business

The Netherlands



Turning Plastic Prevention into Business Practice

In 2016, I founded Searious Business with a clear mission: prevent plastic from entering our ocean by stopping it at the source. I focus on circular economy solutions—using less, designing smarter, and switching to reuse systems—so businesses can reduce their reliance on virgin plastics without losing performance or value.

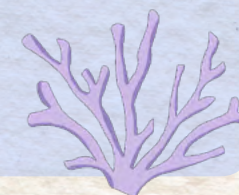
Over the years, I've seen that companies can be powerful agents of change, but shifting from "business as usual" to circular thinking takes more than good intentions. It takes practical alternatives, proof that they work, and the persistence to keep the conversation moving. That's why I collaborate with major brands and retailers—especially in packaging, furniture, and consumer electronics—helping turn sustainability into concrete decisions that also improve resource efficiency and strengthen business cases.

One result I'm proud of is our growing impact assessment: in 2023, Searious Business helped avoid 160,763 tonnes of plastic waste. I'm also proud of co-creating the world's first circular design sofa, developed with Delft University of Technology and Gispem/Arend—built from 3D-printed components and designed to be assembled and disassembled without glue or staples. It won the Dutch Design Award in 2019, showing that circular design can be both functional and beautiful.

The journey hasn't always been easy. One of my biggest challenges has been changing mindsets—inside companies and beyond—and navigating global collaboration across different rules, sectors, and expectations. Still, I keep showing up: as an advisor to UNEP on the plastics treaty process, and as an advisor to the Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty, working with others to push prevention higher on the agenda.

My Advice

Be Unstoppable.



THE BLACK SEA



"The sea inspires me to think beyond limits. Every wave reminds me that persistence carves paths, no matter how strong the obstacles."



Sorina Uleia

Founder & CEO at Recycllux

Romania



Turning Machine Learning into Action for Cleaner Shores

My journey reflects the power of passion and purpose in driving meaningful change. The seaside has always been my sanctuary- a place of beauty and peace. But over the years, I watched as plastic waste accumulated along the shores and in the water. Rather than waiting for change, I decided to act. I couldn't stand by as the problem grew, knowing I had the skills to help tackle it.

Together with my co-founders, Alexandra and Bogdan, I launched Recycllux, a BlueTech startup harnessing technology to combat marine plastic pollution. Alexandra's expertise in AI and PhD research laid the foundation for our machine-learning algorithm, which detects plastic waste hotspots. Bogdan, as a solutions architect, brought the technological vision to create an integrated system that transforms data into action.

One of the most valuable lessons I've learned is that true growth happens outside your comfort zone. Building Recycllux was not easy-we faced doubts and setbacks-but those challenges pushed us to think creatively and persist. Today, our work is already making a tangible difference, proving that small actions, when driven by purpose, can lead to lasting change.



My Advice

Curiosity is essential—explore your passion for the sea and think about how your unique skills can contribute.

“Resilience is not about never falling, it’s about rising stronger every time the tide pulls you under.”



Yuliia Buhlak
Founder/CEO of Fiskin

Ukraine



Fish Leather, Three Restarts, One Unbreakable Brand

Starting a business is never easy. Starting over three times is a true test of resilience. My journey with Fiskin, a brand creating luxury accessories from fish leather, began in Ukraine just before the war. It was a bold fusion of sustainability and craftsmanship, but the novelty of fish leather made it difficult to attract investors or find skilled manufacturers. So I began producing the accessories myself. Then the war changed everything.

Forced to flee with my three-year-old daughter, I arrived in Norway with no funding, no workspace, and no network. I started again from zero. My Norwegian neighbors helped me raise funds for an industrial sewing machine — a small but decisive turning point. I became one of the first refugees to officially register a business in Norway and even built my own website to save costs. My first clients were friends, then their friends. Slowly, Fiskin began to grow.

Within a year, the brand was featured in national newspapers, named among the top three innovators in Gjøvik municipality, and won sel pitch competitions. Receiving praise from Karen Elleman, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, was a proud moment.

Yet the hardest challenge was distance from home. After 2.5 years, my daughter and I chose to return to Ukraine. Now I am relaunching Fiskin for the third time — carrying resilience, courage, and the belief that even in the most unpredictable waters, we can reinvent ourselves and move forward.

My Advice

Embrace Resilience – Challenges will come, but your ability to adapt and push forward will define your success. Every setback is a lesson, not a defeat. Build Your Network – Surround yourself with people who support your vision. Collaboration and community are powerful tools for growth, especially in a field that thrives on innovation and sustainability.

THE BALTIC SEA



"I believe that spirulina should be on the everyday menu for more people."



Agnese Stunda-Zujeva

Founder, CEO, R&D Head of SpirulinaNord

Latvia

From Research to Real Products with Microalgae

I am a chemical engineer by training. My PhD focused on implant materials derived from glass-ceramics, but after finding out that spirulina was one of the most promising and inspiring products, and with a unique nutritional profile, I shifted towards microalgae. What started as a search for a new research topic gradually drew me into the start-up world, where bold ideas—like growing spirulina in the north or building indoor farms—were valued more than traditional research paths.

In fact, I built our first photobioreactor and founded SpirulinaNord in 2019, registering as a food producer and selling frozen spirulina before my first spirulina research project even began in 2020. For the first two years, we sold everything without marketing—word of mouth was enough, and customers came back with powerful feedback about the health benefits they experienced. That encouragement mattered. I also realised how different the start-up pace was: ideas could be tested and implemented quickly, without long proposals. And the outcome was tangible—a real, sustainable, healthy product.

Seeing people suspicious eye at a spirulina drink that looks like mud, then being surprised that it smells like berries and tastes like lemonade, still makes me smile. In the Baltic countries, where algae were virtually unknown, we've been selling spirulina for over five years. Our drinks have helped to change perceptions and make algae accessible and enjoyable—even for picky kids.

Of course, hardware-based biotech isn't cheap or easy. Scaling up takes effort and investment. But when I see returning customers, or notice my own children getting sick less often, the value is clear. My story shows that changing careers—from ceramics to biotech, from research to business—is possible. And so is turning spirulina into lemonade.

My Advice

Small steps can take you far. Just start. And find people who believe in at least part of your idea—because not everyone will see the full picture the way you do.

“No one gets through life alone”



Angela Schultz-Zehden

Manager-Owner of s.Pro / Managing -Director of SUBMARINER

Germany



20 Years of Building Bridges for Our Ocean

I grew up on the non-maritime island of West Berlin, where my educational background—economics, European affairs, and international management—gave no hint that I would become a Woman Ocean Champion, awarded the European Commission’s ‘Woman of the Blue Economy’ in 2017. What has always driven me is creating effective cross-disciplinary collaboration, coordination, and cooperation. My path into the blue world may have been coincidental, but it has allowed me to contribute to the health and sustainability of oceans that transcend borders. For the past 20 years, I have dedicated myself to connecting the dots through my company and international networks.

Early in my career, I designed and coordinated influential projects that led to the development of the maritime spatial planning (MSP) policy tool. This work culminated in the EU MSP Directive in 2014 and the EU MSP Platform, which I built from scratch. Seeing all EU countries now implement MSP and the platform function as I designed it is a proud achievement. Equally significant is founding and managing the SUBMARINER Network since 2015. Through it, we strategically bundle projects, foster science-policy-enterprise communication, and align environmental and economic objectives—an innovative model I continue to develop with my international team and partners.

This journey was and is, of course, still full of challenges. Balancing the demands of multiple projects, roles, and expectations—both external and internal—was not easy. Without many role models, I had to define what it meant to be a good mother, expert, manager, and entrepreneur, all while maintaining my own well-being. I’ve learned the importance of building trust, delegating responsibility, and surrounding myself with people willing to share risks and support one another, especially in stressful times. Working alongside younger colleagues is a constant source of inspiration—they teach me as much as I hope to inspire them.



Think step-by-step without forgetting your key long-term goals and values. Success is less about ingenuity and more about steady, honest effort. Be as gentle to yourself as to others: accept failures and drawbacks, see them as an essential ingredient that fosters new ideas. Stay away from bad vibes and maintain an open mindset. There is a lot out there in the ‘blue’ waiting for you.

"Strength has nothing to do with perfection - it grows from love, dedication, and resilience."



Bianka Grunow

Leader of the work group "Fish growth physiology" at the Institute for Farm Animal Biology

Germany



Science, Motherhood, and Not Giving Up

I want to show that scientific work and family life can go hand in hand. After completing my degree in biology, research stays in Colombia, Canada, and Norway taught me adaptability and openness to new challenges. I returned to Germany for my PhD at the Fraunhofer Institute for Marine Biotechnology / University of Lübeck, and later continued my academic career in the UK—this time with a baby.

The path wasn't always easy. Fixed-term contracts, sometimes very short, were emotionally demanding. During my second pregnancy, I experienced a period of unemployment and eventually accepted a position as a student research assistant, despite already holding a PhD. The support of my partner, a mentoring programme, and my professional network helped me to keep going.

While raising two children, I now lead the Fish Growth Physiology work group at the Research Institute for Farm Animal Biology and have completed my habilitation at the University of Greifswald. My research focuses on fish larvae and their responses to environmental and climate change, aiming to understand adaptation mechanisms and contribute to a more sustainable aquaculture and fisheries. A central goal of my work is to reduce animal testing in fish research by developing innovative cell culture models, thereby promoting animal welfare.

It is important to find a balance between science and motherhood/family. The love for your children and family as well as your passion for your work will ultimately make you stronger. Never let anyone convince you that you are worth less as a woman.

My Father always told me and my sister:
"You can be what
you want to be!"



Elisabet Brock

Consulting in Marine Education and Active Founder of
Nordic SeaFarm

Sweden



Planting the Seeds of Change through Kelp Cultivation

My passion for the sea started as a toddler, but my first profession was as a primary school teacher. Despite this, I was always soaking in everything I could about the Ocean. In my 40s, I took the leap and started courses in marine biology, despite having little self-confidence. But this spark led me to pursue graduate courses, and eventually, I earned a PhD in marine ecology, researching chemical defence in algae. That was when I was truly hooked.

In 2016, my colleagues and I co-founded Nordic SeaFarm AB (formerly KosterAlg), a kelp cultivation company. Today, it's growing steadily and has become an influential player in the Blue Economy across several European countries. Alongside this, I've remained connected to Göteborg University, using my knowledge to educate the next generation of researchers. I've developed a methodology where pupils and teachers are encouraged to think and conduct research like proper scientists.

Despite the success, my journey wasn't without its challenges. There was a 25-year gap between my first university studies and my marine biology courses. During this time, I raised three children and worked as a teacher, but when I returned to academia, I had to overcome a lack of self-confidence. The graduate courses in computing, statistics, and analysis were all new to me, and it was tough. But with perseverance, I pushed through, built my skills, and proved to myself that it's never too late to follow your passion.

My Advice

Follow your passion and never let age be a barrier. Your unique perspective and experiences will only enrich your journey. Keep learning, stay curious, and don't be afraid to take that first step—even if you're unsure.

"Progress is better than perfection."



Jannica Haldin
Special Advisor at HELCOM



Embracing Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things

I grew up by, on, and in the Baltic Sea. While it may be small and often overlooked, there's nothing quite like it. This sea has shaped me in ways I can't fully describe, which is why I've dedicated my life to understanding, sharing, and protecting it. As Cousteau once said, "we protect what we love." Over the last 20 years, I've led an all-female field team in the wild, harsh, but stunningly beautiful outer archipelago of the Kvarken UNESCO World Natural Heritage site. I've mapped previously unseen worlds as a scientific diver, led the most comprehensive ecological status assessment for a regional sea, and guided international marine policy. I've negotiated with ministers and governments and taken the stage at global ocean events like the UN Ocean Conference and the Ocean Decade.

But the most inspirational thing about my story is this: I'm not special. Exceptionalism is a post hoc fallacy. We often assume those who do extraordinary things are exceptional, which makes many girls and women feel like they can't make an impact unless they are somehow extraordinary. But the truth is, ordinary people do extraordinary things, and anyone can be inspirational without being exceptional. I wish more women in the Ocean space knew this.

I have also had my share of challenges. Finding the balance between what I should do and what I could do—understanding my realistic limitations—has been difficult. For me, the only way to find my limits was to push them. I've had to be honest with myself and listen to my own needs, making sure to maintain those boundaries while pursuing opportunities.

My Advice

Figure out what's important to you and why. Find people who share the same vision—they will help you through the tough times. Try to understand the perspectives of those who may differ from your own, even if you don't agree. Kindness, compassion, and understanding, combined with integrity, are an undervalued powerhouse.

"Balance is key - work hard, but care for yourself and family even harder. Stay true to yourself. Let your intelligence and drive make the impact. You may be seen as a cat, but think like a tiger - mindset is everything."



Kerli Sarap

CEO/Founder (Seaweesh) and Chief Quality Officer (Est-Agar)

Estonia



Pioneering a Bluer Future with Seaweed

After spending 14 years climbing the ranks in the financial sector, I realised I wanted to create something of my own—innovative and meaningful. While on maternity leave with my first son, I found my true purpose: to build a better future for him and the world he'd grow up in. Holding a newborn in one hand and a vision in the other, I decided to become an entrepreneur.

I began my journey with a business focused on sustainable, controlled bioplastic tableware, but soon realised that bioplastics were just a partial solution. My curiosity led me to explore alternatives, and that's when I discovered the untapped potential of seaweed waste. This newfound interest drove me to start Seaweesh, where we turn seaweed manufacturing residue into biodegradable seedling pots, creating a sustainable alternative to oil-based plastics.

Throughout the journey, there were numerous challenges. Starting a business from scratch required persistence, but I had to learn quickly and find partners who shared my vision. The real challenge came from the marine industry, where knowledge about seaweed's potential is still limited. But I kept pushing forward, learning from every setback and refining my approach.

I've learned that being a female entrepreneur in the Blue Economy comes with its challenges. I've had to overcome doubts, push past barriers, and prove that a woman can lead in this space. But with the right team, resilience, and persistence, Seaweesh is now on track to replace plastic seedling pots in the herb-growing industry, first in Estonia and soon globally.



Breaking into a male-dominated industry isn't easy, but confidence, resilience, and expertise will set you apart. Blue Biotechnology is full of untapped potential—be bold, think innovatively, and carve your path. Work hard, but prioritize balance. Challenge expectations instead of changing yourself. The Blue Economy needs fearless women—why not you?

"Every voice matters
- trust your path, build
connections, and shape
the future together."



Liina Joller-Vahter

Founder, CEO, R&D Manager, Researcher, Lecturer,
Mentor, Angel Investor

Estonia



From Economics to Biotechnology

I was crazy enough to start a biotechnology company without having a background in the field. But my expertise in economic analysis, innovation management, and supporting start-ups from other industries gave me the insights I needed to launch Estonia's first microalgae cultivation and valorisation firm. Through these diverse skills, I was able to set up a team of experts who helped me to establish Power Algae, a company providing ingredients and tech-nological expertise to collaboration partners.

In addition to growing Power Algae, I've also been actively involved in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, arranging "blue-related" hackathons, mentoring, and angel investing in new, ambitious founders. Contributing to initiatives like the EU Blue Invest and supporting projects focused on the blue bioeconomy has been immensely rewarding. I've also had the chance to contribute to policymaking both nationally and internationally, through studies like Estonia's bioresources valorisation research and the EU Blue Bioeconomy Forum roadmap.

One of the greatest challenges I've faced is that my background isn't in biotechnology. I rely heavily on my colleagues' expertise and my international expertise network for support. While the commercial use of microalgae is still relatively new, the global knowledge surrounding it is vast, and sometimes the challenge lies in finding the right connections to tap into that wealth of information. With microalgae having the potential to be used across a wide va-riety of sectors—from fertilisers and energy sources to high-value pharmaceutical ingredi-ents—the challenge is also in focusing our efforts where they can make the most impact.

My Advice

Don't be afraid to try new things, whether in the Blue Economy or elsewhere. The best time to start was yesterday; the next best time is now. If you have passion and persistence, many challenges in the blue sector are waiting to be solved. As an economist and mentor, I advise you to ensure your unit economics work before scaling up. In the algae sector, we've seen cases where both public and private funds have been wasted by not doing this first.

"The biggest barriers for women in the blue bioeconomy are not always resistance or discrimination, but expectations, family structures, and access to capital."



Susanna Minnhagen

Project manager at Ecopelag EF

Finland

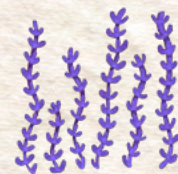


Balancing Family and the Blue Economy: Finding Strength in Change

My personal journey in the mussel cultivation business has been rather "boring" more than "empowering", but with challenges and sacrifices other women will relate to.

Before I had children, I worked at sea with marine monitoring, often the only woman in this role at the university. I loved the work, but after three years my body couldn't handle the constant lifting, cold, noise, seasickness, and night shifts. I lost weight, developed arthritic pains, and relied on painkillers. Nevertheless, my biggest barrier wasn't physical—it was family life. Being away from home makes it hard to combine work with childcare, especially with a husband also working at sea. Although I am aware that this is specific to my situation, when talking to other female friends it seems the pattern repeats: Your husband and your parents won't naturally step in and take care of your children when you are away, becoming a daily struggle. In fact, they will convince you to leave and you will find yourself sitting in the office learning all those other skills that are needed in a modern company and that are easier to combine with family life.

This is how I ended up transitioning to office-based roles: administration, economy, reports, HR. As you will see, everyone will be happy about the situation except you, and although I like working with blue bioproducts, it is not the daily job that I imagined. My example is that of a woman who let herself become "defeated" by expectations and traditions.



My Advice

The Blue Economy now undergoes the same revolution as Green Economy, a chance for those with interest and skills to contribute to more sustainable ways to provide food, energy and raw materials. The field has a lot of empty space for women, so go for it! Marry a stay-at-home dad if you don't like to be stuck in the office, but either way, we need you here.

“Progress is born from possibility - every challenge is an invitation to innovate.”



Valentina Lunosheva

Co-founder of Algrid

Germany



Turning Sargassum Into Climate Solutions

As an immigrant fully integrated into a new country, a wife and mother of three, as well as a medical practitioner who validated my degree in Germany while learning a fourth language, I've built my career on persistence and purpose. That same determination drives my work in climate innovation, where global challenges must be solved with deep respect for local communities.

Confronted with the escalating sargassum crisis in the Caribbean, I co-founded a startup to turn this environmental threat into a climate solution. Through scientific collaboration and firsthand field work, I helped design scalable systems for offshore harvesting and conversion of sargassum into a range of products for agriculture, construction, textiles and cosmetics — solutions that can deliver negative emissions while creating new economic opportunities for coastal regions. A key step was developing an AI-driven satellite monitoring solution to forecast sargassum, predict offshore biomass movement, and identify optimal harvesting zones so collection can happen before landfall. We also established one of the first integrated offshore sargassum supply-chain models, including securing a license for open-water biomass harvesting — building the upstream link needed for industrial-scale supply.

Leading a startup while navigating postpartum recovery tested my time management and resilience. I don't see “work-life balance” as choosing between two sides; I prefer the idea of harmony. Flexible planning and prioritising my wellbeing helped me keep moving forward, and shaped my leadership style to be more resilient, adaptable, and grounded in empathy.

My Advice

Be clear about your goals and values, but be flexible in your path. Prioritise your wellbeing — personal strength is the foundation for lasting impact. And seek collaborators who share your vision; changing the Blue Economy means working together.

"A business can be the prototype of the world you want to live in."

Jennifer Armburst



VYLD - Ines Schiller, Melanie Schichan

Founders of Vyld

Finland

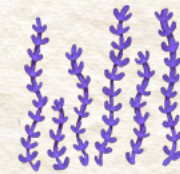


Redefining Sustainability in Menstrual Health

At Vyld, where we created the world's first tampon made from seaweed, we are driven by a simple belief: the Ocean and our bodies can thrive together in a regenerative future. Founded by Ines Schiller and Melanie Schichan, Vyld taps into the huge potential of seaweed to design sustainable products that are good for people and the planet. Our first step was the KelpoN, the world's first seaweed tampon, combining ocean health with gender equality.

Breaking into tampon manufacturing, with its decades-old machines and rigid supply chains, wasn't exactly smooth sailing. Innovation here felt impossible, but we dove in headfirst. With creativity, persistence, and plenty of late-night experiments, we worked hand in hand with machine owners to bend old infrastructure toward a new purpose. Every hurdle pushed us to think bigger, dream bolder, and never settle.

Since then, we've taken the KelpoN from sketch to market in under three years, and even prototyped seaweed-based diapers, pads, and panty liners. Each milestone is a step toward reshaping an entire industry and building an "algaeverse" of regenerative, healthy products that protect the planet while serving people.



Our Advice

Stay true to your values and embrace authenticity. The real breakthroughs come when you challenge "business as usual," keep experimenting, and refuse to play by outdated rules.



Co-funded by
the European Union

