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## Tundi's Take: Is blue growth taking us where we want to go?

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Blue growth – the strategy to promote economic and employment growth from the oceans, seas and coasts – is alluring. But are we really ready for where that growth could take us?

One direction we could be headed is a future where ocean values are recognized and preserved for the widest array of beneficiaries possible – both human and non-human. But blue growth's emphasis on economic values may instead be spurring a gold rush mentality that threatens the very ecosystems that provide the goods and services on which it depends.

### Is blue growth sustainable?

There are two dimensions to this question, and they are related. First is the issue of equity. Policies and plans that boast the 'unlocking of the blue growth potential' not only aim to maximize ocean use, they may in fact favor new uses over old. Powerful commercial interests may hold sway over decisions about marine resource allocation and access to ocean space. The traditional user, the small-scale enterprise, and the non-consumptive values – especially those that don't generate revenue – seem very vulnerable in this blue gold rush. This should lead us to question whether it is socially sustainable for countries to develop policies that favor powerful commercial interests over those of their citizens more broadly.

Second is the issue of whether oceans will be able to withstand the increased pressures that expanded and intensified uses will bring. This is especially true in light of the shifting ecosystem and eco-social dynamics that global climate change will be expected to bring. Decisions made about resource allocation, based on what is available to use today, are unlikely to lead to sustainable strategies for use in the future. And when conservation is just one of many specific interests at the bargaining table rather than the foundation for sustainable use, the blue economy risks becoming a boom then bust economy. A recent study by [Tessa Mazor and colleagues](#) (2014) found that marine planning that multiplies the number of uses in a particular place (in this case a part of the Mediterranean Sea) are not able to meet conservation outcomes as easily and have greater opportunity cost. And with species, habitats, and ecosystems threatened, both economic and social sustainability will be unattainable.

### Return to the plantation era?

At the Caribbean Coastal Conference held in Barbados last month, Dr. Leonard Nurse of the University of the West Indies rattled the assembled government, donor, and civil society participants when he expressed his fear that boosting the blue economy could in fact lead to a return to the plantation era – with profits reaped by large multinational corporations and benefits flowing out of small island states faster than the trade winds.

Change from the status quo is certainly needed as ocean ecosystems steadily deteriorate. But I'd caution again that we need to be very careful that blue growth leads us to where we want to go – and not to points of no return with extinctions of species, extinctions of ways of life, and societies with even greater inequities than exist today.

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