The Seafarers' Award recognises the individual or group from the sea-faring community that has done the most this year to advance marine conservation. Nominees for the Seafarers' Award must have undertaken efforts to advance marine conservation, be it through awareness-raising, fundraising, direct conservation activities, or any other means.

Of course, those who sail have a vested interest in maintaining the health of the world's oceans. Even so it's a credit to the Land Rover BAR sailing team that it has a sustainability strategy, driven by Dr Susie Tomson, who has sailed since childhood and has a PhD in integrated coastal management.

“At Land Rover BAR we are striving to achieve major sustainability objectives, with a light environmental footprint, zero waste and minimal energy consumption,” she says. “We also have significant opportunities for creating positive change through our community engagement and building an innovative technical and design capacity and skills base. The America’s Cup attracts more media and public attention than any other sailing contest, and we can use this spotlight to lead change.

“At each America’s Cup World Series [most recently in Bermuda, Oman, Chicago and Portsmouth] we run an outreach event mainly aimed at engaging young people,” she continues. “We create practical events like beach clean-ups, upcycling waste,
messaging around ocean plastics and gifting refillable plastic bottles.” We need, she adds, to do all we can to “eliminate plastics and pollutants from entering the water”.

Among other initiatives she and the team have set up are beach clean-ups near the team’s Portsmouth base, when team members took to the waters to remove rubbish – filling a large wheelie bin with plastic in just half an hour. The results were shared across all Land Rover BAR’s media and social media channels, to encourage others to take action in protecting their own local environments. “You’d be hard pressed to find a sailor who didn’t care about the issue of plastics and waste that are reaching the oceans,” Tomson says.

In collaboration with Blue Marine Foundation, Land Rover BAR also established the Solent Oyster Restoration Project to restore the local oyster population, which had collapsed in 2013 owing to changing environmental conditions, invasive predators and overfishing.

But perhaps most innovatively, in November 2015 the team developed a virtual chase boat, enabling data to be shared in real time and removing the need for an actual chase vessel, so saving about 10,000 litres of diesel each year. Land Rover BAR has also built two support boats with a high proportion of sustainable materials such as bio-resin, recycled PET core material and a flax-fibre deck, all of which resulted in a 20 per cent reduction in the boats’ embodied carbon.

All of this has contributed to the team winning the Beyond Sport, Sport for Environment award, making it the first sailing team, and possibly even the first British sports team, to win such approval.

**Highly Commended: Fishing for Litter, KIMO International**

Since the project was launched in 2000 by KIMO International (the Danish-based association of more than 70 local governments and municipalities across northern Europe), boats participating in the Fishing for Litter scheme have collected more than 4,500 tonnes of rubbish from the sea.

In the words of Tom Piper, the project’s UK co-ordinator, “Fishing for Litter is a very simple idea. Trawlers are given hard-wearing bags. They take them off sailing, fish as they would and take any litter they find in their nets, put it in these bags and bring it ashore. They just leave it on the quayside, and harbour staff come and put it in a locked skip and then it’s disposed of responsibly.”

It benefits the fishers too, reducing the risk of contaminated catches and damaged nets. As one Brixham fisherman puts it: “It’s brilliant, a win-win. It makes life easier for us.”
The Science Award recognises the individual or research team that has made the most important scientific contribution to the ocean this year. Nominees for the Science Award must have published a significant piece of scientific research that can be used for the benefit of marine conservation or ocean health.

Early last year, the marine biologist Dr Daniel Pauly, a professor at the University of British Columbia, and the fisheries scientist Dr Dirk Zeller, executive director of the Sea Around Us, a research initiative at the same university’s Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, published a study in the journal Nature Communications that concluded that fish were being taken from the oceans in far greater numbers than previously thought. Through their work, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Paul G Allen Family Foundation and based on research by an international network of 400 researchers, Pauly and Zeller revealed that over the past 60 years the global catch had been about 50 per cent greater than official estimates suggested it was. That said, explains Pauly, “global catches are actually declining because of overfishing and because no new stock are available to mask the decline”.

“So this is not a positive message,” says Zeller. “Too many fishing boats are chasing the too few fish that are left, though the fact that we catch more than reported does mean the oceans are more productive than we thought.”
Pauly first wrote a paper drawing attention to official data being incorrect as far back as 1998, after which the pair collaborated on a project for the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council in Hawaii. “This found that official data covered only a section of commercially caught fishes,” Pauly says. “Non-commercial catches were rarely if ever considered. Even some commercially oriented fisheries weren’t covered. From there, we expanded this research and discovered that the issue of under-reporting is both substantial and global.”

The two have also produced a book on the subject, *The Global Atlas of Marine Fisheries* (Island Press). Given that, as both agree, the principal challenges facing the world’s oceans are overfishing, warming and acidification, will their work make a difference, especially to the tropical grouper, Atlantic cod and bluefin tuna, which both men identify as the most acutely overfished species? Pauly is circumspect: “No, not to fishing behaviour, but to fishing policy and investment, at least in some countries,” he says.

“Ever since I was a child and started to swim dog paddle in lakes in southern Germany, I’ve been happier with my head under water than above,” says Zeller. Then “one thing led to another” and he found himself studying marine biology on Australia’s Great Barrier Reef and in Southeast Asia, “the birthplace of tropical coral reefs”.

Does Pauly, too, feel he belongs in the ocean? “I didn’t learn to swim till I was about 12, in the public pool of the small Swiss town where I grew up,” he says. “But I know what’s in it.”

**Highly Commended: Erik van Sebille, Imperial College London**

Winner of the 2016 European Geosciences Union Ocean Division Outstanding Young Scientist award, the Dutch oceanographer and climate scientist Dr Erik van Sebille is based at Imperial College London, where his research focuses on the way ocean currents carry heat, nutrients, marine organisms and plastic around the world and the impact plastic pollution is having on the marine environment. His paper, co-authored by his student Peter Sherman and published in Environmental Research Letters, shows that focusing plastic clean-up operations near coastlines significantly reduces the harm it can do to ecosystems. An interactive website, plasticadrift.org, demonstrates where plastic ends up depending on where it reaches the sea. Discard a plastic bottle – or rather, don’t! – in the Mexican Caribbean and in four years it might have reached the Bay of Biscay.
The Responsible Business Award recognises the company or group of companies that have done the most to ensure that their business operations are not undertaken at the expense of the marine environment. Nominees for the Responsible Business Award must have undertaken activities or commitments that will have a positive impact on the health of the marine environment, or have seen another significant milestone towards that goal. This activity or commitment must have been undertaken primarily to benefit the ocean, rather than the company’s bottom line.

As global warming increases, the gradual retreat of the polar ice cap has enabled industrial trawlers from Russia and Norway to work in ever more northerly waters, so threatening what was one of the last pristine marine environments.

Last May an international group of trade associations, unions, processors, manufacturers and retailers struck a deal that promised to protect a part of the Arctic Ocean from industrial fishing for Atlantic cod. It undertook “not to expand activities with trawl gear into those areas where regular fishing has not taken place before”, in a stretch of the Arctic that extends north from the Norwegian and Barents seas around the islands of Svalbard in Norway to the North Pole, encompassing both Norwegian and international waters. Anyone fishing in these waters cannot sell their catch to the signatories to the agreement, which includes not just Russia’s Union of Fishermen of the North, Russia’s Karat fishing operator and Fiskebåt (the Norwegian Association of
Owners of Fishing Vessels, which represents 90 per cent of Norway’s ocean-going fishing fleet), but also frozen food producers such as Birds Eye, Findus, Iglo and Young’s Seafood; the Danish company Espersen (which is Europe’s largest processor of frozen fish); McDonald’s; Icelandic Seachill, a leading supplier of chilled fish to the UK retail market; and the British supermarket chains Asda, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury’s and Tesco.

Among those who worked on the agreement is Alex Olsen, head of sustainability at Espersen, which he joined in 2007 from McDonald’s Europe, where he pioneered the company’s Agricultural Assurance Programme. A Danish national holding masters degrees in both food science and environmental management as well as serving on the Marine Stewardship Council’s technical advisory board, Olsen is enabling Espersen, “which has always had a strong commitment to sustainability... to align and focus our efforts on the areas where we can have the most impact”.

“Changing environmental conditions have led to a re-evaluation of our fisheries,” he has said. “Strategies have been introduced to prove that the administration of fisheries meets specific standards and requirements, and good practice through innovation and research has helped us respond to the multiple sustainability issues at hand. In short: our industry is evolving.”

Which is just as well because fish consumption per capita has almost doubled over the past half century. Fisheries and aquaculture now support an estimated 10 to 12 per cent of the world’s population, 54 million of them fishers and fish farmers, the rest employed in packaging, processing and other aspects of the supply chain.

**Highly Commended: Six Sense Laamu, Maldives**

Launched in 1995, the Bangkok-based hotel brand Six Senses aspires to gold standard levels of “sustainability and obligation to the environment”. It also champions marine conservation, a commitment evident at its hotel in the Maldives, the only resort on Laamu Atoll. It has a partnership with the local charity Manta Trust and a full-time sustainability officer on its staff. It has established a coral farm and donated $100,000 to the Maldivian Grouper Project, which aims to establish a local healthy grouper fishery and set up a marine protected area in Laamu Atoll.

In 2016 the hotel also held its first Save the Sea Turtles festival in collaboration with the South Central Division of the Maldives Police Service, which drew 600 participants, who created a huge turtle-shaped installation of discarded plastic waste that they had collected on local beaches.
Policy Award: Claire Nouvian, BLOOM

Photographed by Iris Brosch
The Policy Award recognises an individual or group that has been responsible for the most important policy initiative for the benefit of ocean health this year. Nominees for the Policy Award must have been responsible for initiating or implementing a policy initiative, or have reached another significant milestone in that process. This policy must have had, or be very likely to have, a transformative effect on the ability of governments or local bodies to protect the oceans.

Last June, the European Union agreed to ban bottom trawling at depths below 800 metres in all European waters, marking a long-fought victory for the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition and BLOOM, a French organisation founded by Claire Nouvian.

Nouvian first became aware of the devastation caused by deep-sea bottom trawls when she was researching her book *The Deep*, published in 2007, and saw footage shot by Professor Les Watling of the University of Hawaii that showed a stretch of the deep ocean floor off the east coast of the US that had been trawled. It was, she says, “a scene of devastation”.

Deep-sea bottom trawls are, Nouvian explains, “huge weighted nets that are dragged along the sea floor at depths of up to 2,000 metres to collect a few edible (though not necessarily palatable) fish. They destroy everything in their wake: thousand-year-old corals, hundred-year-old sponges and fish. Many species have already been pushed to the brink of extinction. This fishing technique deploys massive industrial ships, which are heavily subsidised by public money to bulldoze a unique marine heritage. Allowing this to occur shows how much humanity has lost common sense.”

As Watling puts it: “The campaign to end bottom trawling in the deep sea was the vision of Claire Nouvian. It took eight years but she persisted, amassing the scientific information that defeated a large fishing company in the French courts that was falsely advertising its sustainable fishing practices. She used social media to stimulate 900,000 citizens to petition an end to deep-sea bottom trawling, and she testified and met with members of the European Parliament.”

Since she established BLOOM in 2005, Nouvian has staged an exhibition at the Natural History Museum in Paris, also entitled *The Deep*, which travelled to dozens of destinations across the world, drawing 2.5 million visitors, and she has waged a long-standing campaign against deep-sea bottom trawling that persuaded the retail group that owns major French retailer Intermarché, which also runs one of the largest deep-sea fleets, to stop using bottom-trawling below 800 metres as of 2015 and to stop selling deep-sea fish in its supermarkets by 2025.

“Of course I didn’t know then how brutal the industrial lobbying would be to maintain this disastrous fishing technique, solely because it benefits a handful of powerful players,” says Nouvian. “But I found out political games are totally disconnected from reality and scientific evidence. It was a fight against the system – political, institutional, lobbying – as well as against the clock.”
Highly Commended: Stiv Wilson, The Story of Stuff Project

In December 2015, the Microbead-Free Waters Act was signed into US law by President Obama. It was the culmination of a four year campaign to ban the tiny particles of solid plastic used in toothpaste, some soaps and exfoliators that wash out from our bathrooms and into the oceans, where fish ingest them.

The drive was created by Stiv Wilson, activist and director of campaigns at The Story of Stuff Project, an NGO based in the San Francisco Bay Area, which crusades against “stuff” on the basis that we all own, consume and then need to dispose of too many things. A keen sailor (he has sailed more than 35,000 nautical miles to four of the five oceanic “garbage patches”), Wilson built a coalition of NGOs in an effort to introduce legislation in 22 US states in a single season, winning in three key states with three individually drafted policies.

Public Education Award: Ian Urbina, The New York Times

The Public Education Award recognises the individual or group that has done the most this year to advance public understanding of marine conservation issues, be it through the mainstream media, in schools, or through campaigning. Nominees for the Public Education Award must have initiated activities that have had a demonstrable impact on the public understanding of an important ocean issue (or issues), or seen a significant milestone in a previously implemented activity.

seas. Its author was the Maryland-based investigative reporter Ian Urbina, who had spent two years travelling across 14 countries and five seas to research the stories. From the thousands of people murdered at sea each year (Urbina witnessed four men shot dead) to what happens to sharks when they are returned to the water after their fins have been hacked off to feed the market for shark fin soup (they sink to the seabed where “they starve, drown or are eaten by other fish”), his findings are shocking and his research exhaustive. Urbina also put himself in considerable danger.

“In Borneo, I was run off a rubber plantation deep in the mountains by several men tied to a criminal syndicate engaged in human trafficking and illegal fishing,” he recalls. “In Indonesia, I was detained by plain clothes police who did not want me to board a fishing vessel to travel to violent and contested waters. In the South China Sea, I hopscotched for days from boat to boat, 50 miles from shore on one vessel, 50 more on the next. The aim was to get out far enough to board one of the long-haul fishing boats notorious for using sea slaves: boys and men forced into labour because of debt or duress to catch fish for pet food. There, I stayed with 40 Cambodian boys who work 20 hour days, barefoot, rain or shine, on a slippery deck, just one misstep from disaster. On our first night, I was awakened by rats crawling across my legs.” But perhaps most terrifying of all, he says, was when he found himself 150 miles off the coast of Ghana one night in three metre swells on a small police boat with no lights or navigational system.

Urbina has been “interested in oceans” since childhood. As a postgraduate student he “worked on a ship based in Singapore and became interested in seafarers themselves” and in the environment within which they work. As he has written, “more than two-thirds of the planet is covered by water, and much of that liquid expanse is ungoverned and potentially ungovernable. Criminal enterprise has flourished in the breach. The global black market for seafood is worth more than $20 billion, and approximately one in every five fish consumed globally is caught illegally”. The subject therefore offered “an unusual journalistic opportunity”. “My goal was to explore the diversity of lawlessness offshore and the attempts to counter it.”

In bringing such issues to a wider public Urbina has not only spurred criminal prosecutions and class-action lawsuits, but also alerted governments to the scale of the problem. A film based on his Outlaw Ocean series and produced by Leonardo DiCaprio is in development.

Highly Commended: Climate Council, Australia

The Great Barrier Reef is one of the richest and most complex natural ecosystems on earth, supporting tens of thousands of marine and terrestrial species, but it is also a valuable economic asset, contributing $5.7 billion a year to the Australian economy through tourism, recreation, commercial fishing and science.

In the first half of 2016, record-breaking ocean temperatures caused bleaching in corals on 93 per cent of the reef, and killed more than one-fifth. The Climate Council staged a series of strategic interventions to urge people to alter their behaviour to combat climate
change, not least by encouraging them to use clean sources of energy instead of fossil fuels. It also exposed the way government officials had pressured UNESCO to remove all mention of Australia from a report on the impact of climate change on World Heritage Sites, owing to fears that it could impact on tourism.

**Local Hero Award: Dennis Bryan Bait-it, Project Sharklink**

Photographed by Steve De Neef

*The Local Hero Award recognises the individual or group that has had the most positive impact on the marine environment within their community this year. Nominees for the Local Hero Award must either have initiated or taken a lead in influencing a significant effort for the benefit of the ocean within their community, or seen a significant milestone in a previously initiated effort.*

Shark fins can sell for 100 times the cost of the rest of the animal’s meat, “money that usually winds up in the pockets of a foreign poacher”, according to investigative journalist Ian Urbina, winner of our Public Education award. In contrast, a live shark “is worth more than $170,000 annually in tourism dollars or nearly $2 million over its lifetime”.

Dennis Bryan Bait-it needs no convincing of the value of sharks to the economy of Malapascua in the Philippines, close to Monad Shoal (aka Shark Point), which is the only place on earth where it is possible to dive with famously shy thresher sharks. As many as 3.9 million threshers are thought to be killed by commercial fishing each year and the worldwide population has declined by 70 per cent, which means they are now officially endangered.
As the proprietor of one of only two Filipino-owned dive shops on the island, Bait-it knows that “everything in Malapascua relies on the benefits the thresher sharks give to this island paradise”. Hence his decision in 2012 to set up Project Sharklink, which he describes as “a community-based organisation of divers, conservationists and educators determined to teach locals about the benefits of dive tourism when it coexists with a well maintained ecosystem”.

For example, the project’s Migo sa Iho (Friends of Sharks) initiative consists of local volunteer fishermen who, since 2014, have been deputed by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources to patrol and protect Monad Shoal and its surrounding waters by reporting any illegal activity and apprehending illegal fishers.

“But we don’t just enforce the law,” Bait-it explains. Sharklink also strives to educate fishermen through its Information Education Campaign, even going as far as employing former shark fishermen in the dive industry. In addition, the project is involved in research, from water sampling to socio-economic surveys of the island.

Bait-it also spearheaded the campaign that led, in 2015, to the announcement that the Philippines’ first shark and ray sanctuary would be established around Monad Shoal and neighbouring Gato Island.

“Dennis is one of the most passionate advocates I have ever worked with,” says American underwater photographer Steve De Neef, who has worked with the local Thresher Shark Project and Save Philippine Seas. “From being a divemaster, he has grown to be one of the hardest working conservationists in the Philippines. His work in Malapascua is inspirational.”

But it is work Bait-it relishes. “It’s a different world down there – beautiful because it is a source of life; dangerous because it’s very unpredictable,” he says. And fragile, too, because “if people continue to abuse it, I think extinction is next”.

**Highly Commended: T. A. Pugalarasan, Sea Turtle Protection Force**

Based in southern India, T. A. Pugalarasan is a fisherman and an active member of the Chennai-based Tree Foundation’s Sea Turtle Protection Force. Between February and May 2016, he managed a sea turtle hatchery, rescuing numerous stranded or injured turtles, among them olive ridley sea turtles (named after the greenish colour of their heart-shaped shells) and two rare green turtles (a herbivore and second only to leatherbacks in terms of size), nursing them back to health before releasing them into the wild.

He also volunteers as an educator, teaching village fishermen about the detrimental effects that nets and especially gill nets have on turtles, persuading trawl fishers to employ turtle-excluder devices – a flap that allows captured turtles to escape from fine-mesh nets – and ensuring fishing communities report nesting turtles and suspected poachers.
Innovation Award: Maria Damanaki, The Nature Conservancy

The Innovation Award recognises an individual or group that has been responsible for the development of the most promising new innovation for the benefit of the marine environment this year. Nominees for the Innovation Award must have taken a lead on the initiation or completion of one or more new innovation for the benefit of the ocean, or seen another significant milestone towards the development of that innovation.

Last year the Nature Conservancy, a global charity, pledged “to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends”, and created a ground-breaking marine investment model when it brokered a debt swap between the government of Seychelles and its Paris Club creditors. This resulted in the restructuring of $21.6 million of Seychelles’ debt in exchange for a commitment by the 115-island archipelago to invest in marine conservation and climate adaptation initiatives, not least the creation and management of a marine reserve of more than 400,000 square kilometres, which will be the second largest in the Indian Ocean.
As Maria Damanaki, the charity’s global managing director for oceans, explains, it specialises in debt-for-nature swaps, having completed “15 of them around the globe, mostly via a US government mechanism called the Tropical Forest Conservation Act. However, funding for TFCA dried up and the Conservancy began to look for additional opportunities to develop debt swaps, or ‘debt conversions’ as we prefer to call them”. This was the first that supported marine conservation.

“We are hoping to close another two deals in the next 12 to 18 months,” she says, “to be able to expand marine protected areas and biodiversity protection zones as well as financing for marine conservation and climate resiliency.” The debt conversions, she adds, “are a great way to take what can be a negative – the high levels of debt in small island developing states – and be able to restructure the debt into funding” for conservation causes. “These deals also support these countries’ policy goals around the blue economy, in particular around improving [the management of] fisheries, coral reefs and adaptation to climate change,” Damanaki says. “These deals create funding streams and improve policy regimes around these blue economy goals in a holistic fashion.”

Born in Crete, Damanaki became the youngest-ever member of the Greek parliament, and served for 25 years. And in 1991 she became the first woman to lead a political party in Greece. Latterly she spent four years as European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, during which the commission oversaw the recovery of fish populations to much healthier levels. Indeed the continuation of her fisheries policy could result in there being 15 million more tonnes of fish in the sea than there were, and 30 per cent more jobs.

“The ocean gives us oxygen, food and joy,” she says. “We give it plastic, too much carbon and reckless fishing. People exploit it first, and consider the consequences later. The ocean is in peril thanks to humanity; only we can help it recover.”

Highly Commended: Amado Blanco and Net-Works, Zoological Society of London/Philippines

Danajon Bank in the Philippines is one of only six double barrier reefs in the world. It’s also among the most degraded, with some of the highest rates of overfishing. Pollution and a declining fish population mean local families are finding it hard to feed themselves. Discarded micro-filament nets, which take hundreds of years to degrade, add to the issue.

Net-Works – a collaboration between the Zoological Society of London and Interface, the global carpet tile manufacturer – has created a community-based supply chain that encourages local communities to collect and sell discarded nets, thereby generating income for themselves. The nets – more than 100 tonnes have been collected so far – are then exported to Slovenia, where they are recycled into yarn to make high-quality carpet tiles. To date, more than 900 families have benefited from the income. And the sea is cleaner.
Visionary Award: Stuart Beck, UN ambassador for Oceans and Seas

Photographed by Devra Berkowitz

The Visionary Award recognises the individual or group that have taken the lead on globally-significant actions for the benefit of ocean health. The winner of the Visionary Award will have shown consistent leadership on ocean issues, going above and beyond others in their commitment to protecting marine life. Nominees for the Visionary Award must have a demonstrable track record of leadership on marine issues. They must either have initiated or taken a lead in influencing a globally-significant effort for the benefit of the ocean, or seen a significant milestone in a previously initiated effort.

In 1976 Stuart Beck, a New Yorker and a lawyer by training, visited Palau, a speck of US trust territory in Micronesia, 530 nautical miles or so east of the Philippines. The object of his visit was to assess the potential environmental impact on local coral reefs of the proposed construction of a giant industrial port. “It was Athens in the time of Pericles,” he told The New York Times.

It was the start of an enduring association with the island that led to his becoming not just an honorary citizen and tireless advocate for it but, a decade after it secured independence in 1994, Palau's ambassador to the United Nations. As he was quoted as saying two years after his appointment: “I said to them: ‘Look, you don’t produce anything, you don’t manufacture anything… the only thing of value you have is your UN vote.’ So they said to me: ‘Why don’t you do it?’"
Thanks to Ambassador Beck, Palau became one of the strongest advocates for marine protection on the international stage. And although he resigned his seat on the General Assembly in 2013, he continued as its UN envoy for oceans and seas.

Among his achievements were aiding Palau's president in securing senate approval for the Palau National Marine Sanctuary; obtaining a resolution to prohibit bottom trawling in sensitive areas of the high seas; organising an effort to ban commercial shark fishing and creating the world’s first shark sanctuary, which inspired many countries to declare their own havens; and founding the Sustainable Oceans Alliance to advocate at the UN for the adoption of an ocean-specific sustainable development goal. “Left out of the Millennium Development Goals entirely,” he wrote, “the oceans, while the common heritage of mankind and the lungs of the planet, are in peril. If we want healthy fish stocks and reefs, we must change the world’s agenda, and the UN is the only place to do it.”

He also championed Palau’s creation of a fully protected marine reserve covering 80 per cent of its waters (an area of 500,000 square kilometres), which was announced in October 2015 and where export fishing, mining and drilling are now banned.

Sadly Beck died of cancer in February 2016, but he is succeeded as UN oceans and seas envoy by his wife, Tulik, whom he met in 1980, a native Palauan and long-time activist for conservation and sustainable development. As Douglas Kysar, a professor at Yale Law School – where Beck studied and was latterly a visiting lecturer, co-teaching a seminar on climate change and the International Court of Justice – puts it: “On the international plane, Palau has been likened to a ‘boxer that punches above its weight class’. It’s no overstatement to say that Ambassador Beck was Palau’s right hook.”

**Highly Commended: Global Ghost Gear Initiative represented by Steve McIvor**

Prominent among the manifold threats facing the world’s oceans is “ghost gear”, fishing equipment or fishing-related litter that has been lost, detached, abandoned and even discarded at sea. For every 125 tonnes of fish caught, it is estimated that a tonne of gear is left behind.

Founded in 2015, the Global Ghost Gear Initiative brings together partners from the fishing industry, private sector, academia, governments and NGOs with the aim of safeguarding marine animals as well as humans from the dangers ghost gear poses. It does this through education, diver training, the development of a code of best practice and the creation of a net recycling pilot in Scotland, among other projects. Christina Dixon, who works on the project, is UK campaigns manager of Sea Change, at the charity World Animal Protection.
As Charles Clover, chairman of the Ocean Awards judges and executive director of Blue Marine Foundation (BLUE), has noted, Ascension Island has been “at the frontier of science” ever since Charles Darwin went there in the 19th century, “so it is entirely appropriate that it is now at the centre of a great scientific effort to designate the Atlantic’s largest marine reserve”.

On January 3, 2016 the British Government announced that half the waters around Ascension, a British Overseas Territory, would become a marine protected area of 234,291 square kilometres – almost the size of the UK – in an isolated stretch of the tropical South Atlantic. The project was made possible by a grant from American conservation philanthropist Louis Bacon’s foundation, the Bacon Foundation, which provided £300,000 to support monitoring and management of the designated area.
At the judges’ meeting it was felt that within the Visionary Award category the achievement of Louis Bacon, who had also been nominated, could not go unrecognised. It was unanimously agreed that he should receive a Special Award for his commitment to ocean conservation.

“The ocean faces many challenges beyond illegal and overfishing, including pollution, habitat destruction, warming and acidification,” says Bacon. “We know that when overfishing is addressed through enforcement of marine protected areas – a key element of this project – ocean life regenerates.

“In 2015 we learned about potential opportunities to partner with BLUE and the British Government on Ascension Island to help establish one of the largest protected areas in the Atlantic,” he continues. “Through our partnership on Ascension, BLUE will help to conduct the scientific analyses and community consultations essential to permanent and successful protection.”

Ascension’s waters are home to the largest population of green turtles anywhere in the world. There are at least 11 endemic fish species (resplendent angelfish, Ascension goby, Lubbock’s yellowtail and white hawkfish among them) and a circumtropical range of fish found off the West African coast and the Caribbean, notably giant marlin, tuna, dorado, black triggerfish, bottlenose and pan-tropical spotted dolphins. Humpback whales also migrate here in September and October to raise their young in its warm waters and there are large colonies of tropical seabirds as well as the island’s own Ascension frigate bird.

British MP James Duddridge, who was Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office when the Bacon Foundation support was announced, said it would cover “the costs of enforcement over the coming fishing season and contribute to surveillance, science and management for the next 18 months”.

Initially the project faced some local opposition. In 2013 the government of Ascension temporarily closed its waters to commercial fishing, which had been poorly managed and was beginning to strain the environment. Island residents clamoured for the ban to be overturned on the grounds that their livelihoods were suffering. The agreement that was reached incorporated their concerns and half of the waters remain open to fishing on the proviso that shark finning remains illegal and that best-practice management is observed.