Transcript of ‘Who are the Ocean 100?’

Season 2, Episode 21, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: In today's episode, we're heading to the seas. We're chatting about coastal ecosystems, how it impacts carbon, and what companies can and should be doing.

Plus, we're introduced to Oceans 100 and no, it's not the sequel to Oceans 11. Let's get into our conversation with John Virdin, director of the Ocean and Coastal Policy Program at Duke University.

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: You know what, Jan, I'm fed up of being on land.

Jan: Oh, shall we go to the sea?

Paul: I don't want to go just to a sea, I want to go to an ocean.

Jan: Well, you're in the right place then, because today we're gonna go back into, um, the ocean context and we're going to have a wee chat about what's happening out there.

Paul: Yes, because in previous episodes we've discussed something called the SeaBOS Project, which stands for Jan…

Jan: …the Seafood Business for Ocean Stewardship.

Paul: I'm glad you remembered because I'd forgotten [Jan laughs] and you work on it, so you need to remember that.

Jan: Yes.

Paul: Yes. We've talked about that project and we've also talked about the blue economy more generally, which is anything and everything to do with the

oceans and the economy where we learned lots of things about shipping registries and things like that.

Jan: But it's not only vessels on the ocean, there's all sorts of other things going on in the ocean as well, or alongside the ocean in terms of ports, et cetera.

So the blue economy is actually a whole myriad of different, um, sectors and organisations, um, operating close to shore, on the shore and then further out into the ocean as well.

Paul: Have you got a particular aspect you think we might talk about today?

Jan: I think we're gonna talk about the lot of them.

Paul: Everything?

Jan: Everything.

Paul: Everything under the sea?

Jan: Yes, indeed…

Paul: …right….

Jan: …and everything on top of it as well.

Paul: So this will be the six hour episode of the podcast, but we'll see how that goes.

Who shall we talk with about this?

Jan: We should talk to a colleague of mine, and an expert in the ocean economy who's at Duke University in the United States.

Paul: Yes. Let's talk to Professor John Virdin, who is director of Ocean and Coastal Policy at Duke University Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions.

It needs to cut down a few words there. It could be a lot more snappy. Um, and that's in Durham, North Carolina. Hello John.

John: Hi Paul. Thanks so much for having me.

Paul: First question, your business card. Can you fit all of that on it?

John: No, absolutely not. I just say that I work on Ocean Policy at Duke.

Paul: Makes a lot more sense. It really does. Um, thank you very much for joining us.

Um, can you tell us a little bit then about your background and. Your expertise when it comes to oceans, and a little bit about what you did before you started at Duke.

John: Yeah, thanks Paul. Sure. It's, it's a bit of a, a zigzag road, but, um, I work on ocean conservation policy.

I'm interested in what governments do to help conserve and protect ocean ecosystems. Particularly for lower income coastal communities throughout the tropics, people who really depend upon the ocean for food and jobs every day.

So, um, you know, I got into this a while back in, when I was coming out of undergraduate, uh, school, I was really interested in income inequality throughout the world and poverty alleviation.

And then I just happened to really love the ocean and I went to Duke's Marine Lab for the summer and figured out I could combine those two things, that if we could better manage and protect the way that we use the ocean, it could provide more food and jobs for a lot of people along the coast, around the world.

And that was it, I sort of said to myself, yep, that's what I want to do. And um, that's right, and so I went back to grad school for it and thought, where could I have the most impact on this? Where could I try to work with as many governments and places around the world as possible?

And, that led me to the World Bank out of grad school, and, um, I just happened to hit the timing right when the World Bank was thinking about moving off of land back into the water after a long hiatus and, um, got started there.

Paul: I misinterpreted that for a second and thought that the World Bank was now based in the Lost City of Atlantis.

Jan: [laughing] Could be. Some of our, a lot of our listeners would've heard of the World Bank, and we all hear the World Bank this and the World Bank that, but what exactly is it?

John: It's a really unique and possibly strange beast, uh, created after World War Two.

So governments around the world were trying to think how to rebuild after World War Two, and it took a lot of money. So they created a global bank that would help fund the reconstruction of Europe. And so that was the idea.

And it was originally a bank that's too big to fail because it was underwritten by governments. Its Board of Governors is governments, and so that's how it was created and expanded over the years to a remit to provide funding to help countries reduce poverty. And that's its mission.

If you walk into the lobby, you look right up onto the wall and it says, you know, our dream is a world free of poverty. That's the goal, whether they achieve it or not, whether they're doing the right strategies for that, it's a whole ‘nother discussion, but that's the idea, is it's a government funded bank to help support countries to, uh, reduce poverty.

Jan: And so what then caused you to go from the World Bank to a university sector?

And what questions did you have after working in with the World Bank that led you to the work that you focus on now?

John: Uh, quite a lot. I mean, I, I was, I had a, a great run there. I worked, um, for 12 years at the World Bank, spent, a lot of time working in West Africa, Pacific Islands, Eastern Indonesia. I really loved it.

I left in part, you know, because of questions in part for personal reasons. I just, a third of my year on the road, uh, made it very hard to even remember the names or have them remember the name, me, uh, for my children, see?

So, uh, but it was also an, uh, there was an opportunity at Duke, there's a, the Nicholas Institute, where I am, it's an environmental policy, think tank that aims to get the university science out to governments to help support policies that can solve some of these problems.

So I sort of thought, well, I've been in a bank trying to use money to support marine conservation and, and poverty reduction. What if I go to university and try to use science and ideas instead?

And so that was kind of what drove me here, and it's been a lot of fun. It's humbling. I learn something new every single day and think about how many things I didn't know.

Jan: [laughs] Isn't that the way of academia though? If you're doing it well, you, you, you should be humbled, as you say most days in figuring out new stuff.

Paul: Have you always had that attachment to the coast and to the oceans? Did you grow up on the coast than near the oceans?

John: There's a question that makes perfect sense and the answer doesn't. No, I never grew up in the, I grew up inland, far away. Uh, for whatever reason, I just always loved the ocean and so wanted to, to get there as, uh, as much as I could, as often as I could.

Paul: Yeah. And saying that you grew up far from the ocean in America is a bit different saying you grew up far from the sea in the UK where the furthest from the sea you can be is about a hundred miles without finding the coastline.

John: Right.

Paul: In America, if you're in somewhere like Colorado or Utah, you are an awfully long way away from the ocean…

John: …exactly. Or in, in Georgia in the part where I grew up.

Jan: Oh, I didn't realise you grew up in Georgia. Does that make him a Texan?

Paul: No. Georgia's a state [Jan laughs] Texas is a state. Forgive Jan and her knowledge of, uh, American geography.

John: It's okay.

Paul: Atlanta, Georgia is…

Jan: …oh, yeah…

Paul: You've heard about Atlanta, Georgia?

Jan: No, I've been to Atlanta, yeah, yeah.

Paul: Or Augusta, Georgia, where they play the golf, the Masters.

Jan: Yeah. Yeah.

Paul: I'm struggling to think of other places in Georgia, but they do exist. [Jan laughs]

John: You, you would struggle a little bit more for the places where I grew up. [laughs]

Jan: [laughs] John, one of the reasons why, why we thought we'd talk to you and, and the thing if you like that really drew our attention, uh, to this area is a paper that you produced on the Ocean 100.

So I'd like to hear what is the Ocean 100? What caused you to do that work and, and what was exciting about the things that you found in that context?

Paul: Hang on, I can answer this. Is it not one of the endless sequels to Oceans 11?

Jan: [laughing] Yeah, yeah…

John: No, no, we, we weren't that clever. Um, yeah. It's basically, it's, it's the Ocean 100 as a, a bad take off of the Fortune 100.

But the idea is that these are the biggest companies operating in the ocean. And knowing who they are would allow us to, to engage with them, to see what they might be willing to do to help conserve the oceans and get a sense of how big of a role they play in the way that humanity uses the seas.

And so it's, the idea actually came from our colleagues at SeaBOS that you've mentioned, and, and Stockholm Resilience Centre. They had this idea that large companies in, uh, the global interconnected economy could act like keystone species in an ecosystem and have outsized influence on what happens in that economy.

And so, you know, as you know, they did this, this study for seafood and found the, you know, a relatively small number of companies might have a disproportionate influence on how the world's seafood is produced and, and the fish caught in the sea.

And so I was really interested and I read that study years back, was really interested in that because at the same time governments had been coming to us saying, what is this thing, the blue economy, what does it mean? Uh, how can we develop the ocean as the next economic frontier?

And think about all of these different industries operating and growing in the ocean simultaneously, together, because their impacts on the ocean are cumulative. It's the same shared fluid space. And so, um, there'd been some work by the OECD and others to define what this blue economy or ocean economy is.

And so my sort of simple thought, uh, was, well, we could do the same type of analysis that they did for the entire ocean economy, for the, all of the economic use of the ocean and see if this keystone pattern holds, if there are some really, I hate to say it but I'm gonna, big fish in the ocean economy, so to speak.

Jan: [laughing] It was gonna come sooner or later wasn't it...

John: …that's right…

Jan: …we weren't going to get away from that…

Paul: …somewhere on our mixing desk, we have a button that makes a drum noise where you go 'bdum tshhhh' [inaudible overlapping speech], yes.

John: Yeah, my children would kill me for that one. But, uh, in any event, that was, that was the idea. And then what we found, I mean, it wasn't any kind of complex math or anything.

It was just counting, trying to, but the thing, the reason it hadn't been done before and the reason it took us so long is because many companies don't think of themselves as being based in the ocean.

They have activities on both land and at sea. Think of like big equipment con companies that are providing dredgers, that dredge up the sea floor or build things in the ocean.

Think about oil and gas companies that have a lot of offshore oil and gas operations, but also on land or even offshore wind. Some of the same companies are doing it, so, and they don't distinguish between that and their bookkeeping and, and so it took a lot of kind of elbow grease to go into the books, disaggregate where their operations are, where the revenues were coming from, so we could…have this consistent measure of who are the biggest players in the ocean, and then it's not their impact.

We don't know how much they're changing the ocean, but at least gives us a sense of that, wow, actually on average across these, these different ocean economy industries, over 40% of the revenues in any given industry, on average are generated by the 10 biggest companies in those industries.

So you start to see, well, there's some really big players in the ocean. The revenues generated, fairly concentrated, is that a good thing? Is it a bad thing? What would happen if these players moved to conserve the oceans? So on.

Paul: Are there any particular sectors and industries that dominate that list then? Or is it really diverse? With a few from loads of industries?

John: We looked at eight of them. Um, the kind of the eight core industries operating in the ocean according to the OECD and of course, you know, far and away offshore oil and gas is the biggest.

And then you have container shipping up there, um, marine equipment and construction, and you get to seafood, but offshore oil and gas is, is still far and away the, the largest, uh, in terms of revenues.

Paul: Mm-hmm. And are there any particular geographies that were dominant in, in that 100 as well? 'Cause I know we've talked a lot on this podcast about how, depending upon where you are, based on different geographies, the legislation that's in place, the different practices that might be in place. So were there any countries, continents, anything similar to that, that dominated that list?

John: Yeah, I mean, and this was a, this was a point that one of the, I mean this was a team that worked on this paper and one of our colleagues, Jean-Baptiste Jouffray, uh, made this point that the geography of where these large companies were based was really interesting because it was North America, Europe, um, China, Japan, um, you know, a relatively small number of countries where these big companies were typically headquartered.

Jan: So we've got these small number of countries where the companies are headquartered, but do they impact the whole of the globe from those locations, or is it in specific regions?

John: Yeah, no, these companies are typically operating throughout the seas. So I mean, it's not uniform obviously, and we haven't mapped their activities yet.

We have colleagues that are starting to do that using satellite um, imagery. That can actually, uh, Pat Halpin, his colleagues at the Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab, Global Fishing Watch, they're looking at, they're starting to be able to map out where are oil rigs, where are wind turbines, where are the boats going?

Um, but we haven't gotten to the point where we can attribute all of that to the companies to actually look at their physical footprint on the ocean yet.

Jan: Yeah, and that'd be quite complicated. And you know, intellectually you think, oh, well of course we would know, but of course we don't, which is, you know, kind of fun as well.

Now, one of the things that you said earlier is that you talked about the sort of cumulative impacts and this fluid space, which are two of the sort of like unique and quite particular, um, aspects of, of the ocean economy.

So are all of these businesses operating in all of these different sectors? Are they, Do they have points where they'll cross over and they're trying to, you know, fish and have cruise ships and have energy, um, and, and have seafood and ports all in the same place? And, and what kind of challenges does that bring to the fore, compared to maybe what we're doing on land?

John: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, this is the challenge of trying to manage human activity in the ocean, is so much of it is shared. And then as these industries are growing and, and we, they're growing fast, in many cases, the oceans in certain areas can become more crowded.

And so there's a whole effort by governments, uh, civil society and places to do what's called marine spatial planning, taking just kind of the principles of land use planning and applying it, adapting it for the ocean to try to start to plan out a little bit more how these industries, these activities might intersect and overlap in this shared space, and how they might affect the underlying ecosystems.

Paul: Is there also a challenge that arises, and this harks back to something we spoke about with Frida Bengtsson, uh, very early on in this current series, about the fact that the ocean isn't necessarily owned in certain places.

Um, so you go so many miles off the coast and then it becomes just the open seas, you know, it's where there's not necessarily the regulation there, the, the legislation there.

So is it, does it become hard to track these companies and understand what these companies are doing if they're operating in areas that aren't necessarily owned by one individual nation?

John: Yeah, absolutely right. I mean, there's the, the law of the sea gives countries jurisdiction out to 200 miles, 200 nautical miles from their coastline. And that's about, say, a third of the ocean's surface. Under national jurisdiction, meaning two thirds of it is not under national jurisdiction, at least

the water, uh, above it. So there have been efforts to try to come up with international agreements for that.

In the nineties there was a fish stocks agreement to manage the big, say, tuna stocks that crossed the, the high seas and areas beyond national jurisdiction.

We've just, in the last couple years, had a new agreement, a new treaty, to try to address biodiversity in this area to say, you know, companies are pushing more and more into the, this areas of the ocean.

Can we look at environmental impacts of their activities? Can we start to think about, do we need to set up protected areas, zone off parts of this? How can it's, this is global commons. How do we agree as countries to do that? Um, so we're, we're all still wrestling with this now.

Paul: We've mentioned, and you've mentioned SeaBOS. Jan works on it, various guests on the podcast to who we've had over the last year and a half work on it. So where does SeaBOS fit with Ocean 100? Is it possible that there might be some kind of collaboration there?

John: Yeah, I mean, we, we tried to actually bring those companies together as a club, called the Ocean 100, and we worked after the paper came out, uh, in 2021, we worked for about a year and a half on this with a number of, you know, between us at Duke, Stockholm Resilience Centre. We have partners at the World Economic Forum, um, Kinsey, others, you know, we, we struggled to really bring companies from such different industries together as a club, uh, to take action for the whole of the ocean.

And, and we had, you know, had a com uh, comments a lot of times that well, why do we in shipping need to be working with oil and gas companies or offshore wind companies or, so it just, um, the Ocean 100 as a club doesn't really exist.

And that thought, that idea coming outta the paper that, wow, what if you could get all the world's biggest ocean based companies together and have them take conservation actions? Wouldn't that be cool? It just in practice, it, it, it didn't come together, it's so, we still have SeaBOS. That's, as you know, a very active, uh, club that exists, but not an Ocean 100 Club.

Paul: If you then take SeaBOS as what might be sort of like a small subset of the Ocean 100, do you feel there's the possibility for other sectors within the

Ocean 100 to maybe set up their own mini versions of SeaBOS as well, but within their own sectors?

John: Yeah, I mean, these exist and I, I don't know them all, but um, you know, certainly within shipping there's, there are coalitions. And then there are some cross-cutting ones, the UN Global Compact has formed an, what they call an Ocean Stewardship coalition. That includes, you know, not just companies but banks and, and other types of private sector, non-state actors.

And part of the reason that I think an Ocean 100 Club didn't come together was a little bit of fatigue amongst companies. Like, you know, hey, we can't spend every hour of the day jumping from one club meeting to the next.

And I think down the road there still could and should be some scope for the largest companies in the ocean to come together for shared ocean conservation initiatives. That would be my hope.

Paul: Mm-hmm. I have a lot of sympathy for those companies thinking, God, that's just too many committees to be a part of and…

John: …that's right…

Paul: …spend all my life in committees. Yeah, yeah. Lot of sympathy.

Jan: But it does, um, and I, I know, know something of that, trying to build that, that network, it also seemed to me that if you go issue by issue, you sort of dilute the whole approach.

So, so I think accidentally we maybe got it right and I'm, I'm using inverted commas on ‘got it right’ with SeaBOS, in that we had five or six objectives that were jointly agreed and, and quite early on, before maybe some of these other industry groups had had evolved, and that we were trying to pursue stewardship and seafood across all of those.

Whereas once you say, well, okay, let's have a little look at say blue carbon. Let's have a little look at, you know, energy efficiency or whatever. It almost dilutes it, and yet they're quite distinctive problems. And then when you put in a whole array of industries around it, that keystone dialogue model, I think breaks down.

I don't think it works at, at that kind of cross-sectoral basis.

Paul: I assume by blue carbon you mean carbon emissions from people working on the oceans, and it's not like a version of Kryptonite where you've got different colour

Jan: No, but, but we have a blue carbon expert on this call, so maybe we should ask [laughing] we should ask. John, can you please explain to Paul what blue carbon is?

Paul: Can you not say it in such a tone [Jan giggles] that suggests God he's not been listening, we've got to teach him like he's a toddler.

John: No, no, it's, it is an absolutely good and fair question. Um. It is used differently, traditionally means coastal, vegetated ecosystems. Sea grasses, wetlands, and mangroves, for example. And we're talking about the carbon that those ecosystems sequester and store.

And they are very good and efficient at doing that. Um, and so that's why it's you, you sometimes think, wow, you can get a lot of bang for your buck, so to speak, by protecting, restoring these types of ecosystems. Um, just as we do with forests, for example.

Now you see it more broadly talking about other types of ocean ecosystems that store carbon from say, seaweed to, you know, moving offshore or deep ocean or, or, you know, just can be referred broadly like any types of, uh, ocean environment ecosystems that store carbon.

And the ocean is, by the way, the biggest carbon pool, or one of you know, is a massive, uh, sink for carbon.

Jan: And I, and I know what you're gonna say, Paul. Yes. There's no way you, you would know what blue carbon was

Paul:. You just threw that phrase out there like it was something I should use every day with my 6-year-old son.

Jan: But it's interesting 'cause there we are, we, we keep on learning stuff and um, I think that whole, the whole basis of the ocean as, as storing carbon, as soaking it up, um, and particularly, you know, coastal ecosystems and, and mangrove swamps, for example, they are phenomenal.

I think we quite often, we don't know functionality, from a functional perspective, how great they are, and so that's really good to learn about as well.

John: Yeah, but I mean, I think your point was a really good one, Jan, is that this is, I'm pointing the finger at myself. I mean, we started, I, we tried to build this science-to-business club in the ocean, this Ocean 100 Club, simply on the notion that, well, you're all the biggest players.

What if you came together, what kind of great stuff could you do? If you really had the science at your fingertips and knew how serious some of these challenges in the ocean are, what would you guys collaborate together to do?

And it was almost a sense of turning around to us and saying, well, what do you guys, what? What should we do? What is it we should all do together? Why should we as, what can we as a shipping company do with an oil and gas company, with a fishing company, what have you, that we couldn't do on our own, or within our own industry.

And so I think we needed what you mentioned, Jan. We needed like, hey, here are the three things that we need all of you to work together on in the ocean. And I'm not necessarily sure I have that list at my fingertips, I'm not sure that I know. But um, and I think we need more information on this stuff we talked about earlier.

Where are they all operating? Which ecosystems do they overlap? But that was, I think, the main thing where we went wrong is we, we just, it was too open-ended.

Paul: I think this ties in a bit with, when we spoke to Julia and Knut from IMD, and that we talked about system leaders, which we know was very similar to keystone actors, and having people who are inspirational at the top and giving goals and getting everyone involved and having those kind of people who can drive forward and push people from different sectors, and the importance of collaboration across sectors and across supply chains and all that kind of thing.

Jan: And I think this is where the idea of a systems leader is more apposite than a keystone actor.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Jan: I think they're probably actually different, different things.

Paul: Yes. Hence, I didn't want to use the phrase keystone actor in this space. 'cause I thought that whilst at the time we talked about the similarities, there are also differences between them. So yeah, I can definitely see how having someone inspirational at the top giving, rather than just generally saying, oh,

go and do something, work together, but saying work on these specific areas, this is where you can get the traction, this is where things could possibly happen.

Jan: And that might still be ahead of us, 'cause um, 'cause just 'cause you try something and it doesn't work, doesn't mean it wasn't a, you know, smart idea in its, in its, you know, essence because it might be as the intensification of, of industries in the ocean, um, happens, that it might be that actually competition over resources and particularly competition over space, might lead organisations from different sectors to start to realise actually going it alone or going, going it alone with just their sector players might be the, you know, a silly idea.

So I think it's still ahead of you, John. I wouldn't give up.

John: No, no. But I think, you know what, what we've moved to right now is more of a model of, okay. Hey, now that we know who all these keystone actors in the ocean are, what if we just formed a club and got you all in the room together? Great stuff would happen, and has science to industry dialogue.

We've moved from that as you know, Jan, to more of, well, we need to figure out a little bit more what they're all doing and what kind of impact they're having and what if we track them and focus more on disclosure and information and understanding where these companies are operating in the ocean and what impact they're having.

Then, um, that would be a more of a starting point for these types of discussions.

Paul: And if you can get them all to work together, we could end up with a cruise ship that has a wind turbine on top of it and uh, big sort of like net, a net out the back to catch fish…

Jan: [laughing] …fresh seafood on the cruise ship...

Paul: …exactly. All the industries could come together, you know, maybe I don't wanna encourage oil and gas drilling, but you know, it could have some kind of like [inaudible] drills hanging from the bottom as it sails through.

I, I, I feel that the type of collaboration that John's referring to is far more complex than my weird, kind of kids drawing of a crazy cruise ship though.

John: We were thinking about collaboration for conservation [Jan laughs] more than, uh, ocean exploitation, but both may happen.

Paul: I, I did say there was gonna be a wind turbine on top.

[Jan laughs, Paul makes indignant noises]

Jan: So, so you said that you are moving forward on looking at characterisation of what's going on. And so I, I know that you've been trying to understand for a subset of that Ocean 100, um, piece, what they are reporting in their sustainability reports and whether or not they are reporting on the scientifically most salient topics.

So could you tell us about that study and, and what you found?

John: Yeah, I, this is, uh, a study we're still trying to finalise, as you, as you know, Jan and Jan, you've contributed as, as one of the co-authors and our, our colleague Jean-Baptiste Jouffray has led it along with many of us, a group of us.

But yeah, the idea was, okay, again, now that we know who these companies are, if we looked at the 15 this time, um, largest companies in each of these ocean-based industries. Could we take a snapshot of what impacts they're reporting on the ocean and compare that to what we would expect them to maybe be doing based on the science?

So we had Jean-Baptiste and a number of his colleagues had already kinda reviewed the scientific literature to say, hey, these are the types of impacts that have been observed or predicted from these industries.

And then we were able to compare that with what they were actually reporting in their sustainability reports, in their annual reports. And so, uh, with the idea to see that is there even, does there appear to be consensus? Are they reporting the same types of impacts? Are they all monitoring and checking this?

Do they even measure their impacts or are they just kind of talking very generally about them? And it was really all over the place. Just scattered. Some very detailed reporting on an a range of impact indicators measuring their, they're trying to measure their footprint on the ocean.

Some barely mentioning it at all. Some barely really considering impacts on the ocean versus impacts on land, as if they were, were the same environment

altogether. So it was, um, it was really interesting to see, if you were hoping to have consistent reporting from ocean-based companies on their impacts in the ocean environment, we're quite far from it at the moment.

Paul: What's next for you then, John? Where do you see your work going in the near or even distant future?

John: [laughs] Um, in the near future, I'm pretty happy to, to be working with Jan and, and colleagues and learning more…

Paul: …no, look, look, look, I've told many guests on this show [Jan starts laughing] you don't have to suck up to Jan. It's, it's absolutely fine…

Jan: …it's all spontaneous, Paul…

Paul: …but it, it can be a case of, yeah, I'm working with Jan, I have to put up with it, but… [Jan continues laughing]

John: No, no, no. It's an absolute joy, and in fact this was, yeah, part of the impetus for, for the call. But, um, no, we, and in all seriousness, I've worked with governments. I mean, I, I work on policy, so I don't really know the private sector, and I've been fascinated for these last few years and we're not achieving global goals for ocean conservation with government action alone.

And not to say that, you know, governments and large companies are the only actors in society, but looking to see what other influential actors could, could help advance progress towards these global ocean conservation goals. And so looking at what these big companies are doing is, is or could do is interesting.

Not, whether they would voluntarily do it, or what would be ways to influence their behaviour? Could banks influence their behaviour? Could finance influence, could consumers, so that's where I've been focusing now, and together with Jan and, and others who know the private sector far better is to see what, what would it take for banks and investors and others to start to push companies in the ocean to better measure their impacts and reduce them to be, to operate more sustainably?

What would it take, what information would consumers need to hold companies accountable more? So I'm kind of pivoting to, as I said, really trying to understand these companies' impacts and how we might better track them and, and hold them accountable and, and shape their own thinking and behaviour on this.

Jan: And that's what I like about John and his work is that it's, it's trying to put together this jigsaw with, with no edges [laughs] and with no picture to, to guide, but actually putting this material together to try to actually understand what's going on. And we kind of think that we understand everything, but we understand so very little.

And I think particularly in the ocean space where it is out remote, out of sight, again might be quite hybrid 'cause uh, organisations are doing land and ocean based things. We, we know very little and you kind of think, we must know, but we don't.

Paul: It seems to be very similar to what is often talked about when it comes to the exploration of space.

Well, actually we don't, we haven't explored lots of the ocean yet, so, but it's not just the natural features of the ocean that we don't know that much about. We don't know a whole lot about all the business and operations that go on there as well.

Jan: Absolutely. Or there's lots of information about it, but none of it's in the same place [laughs] so far.

John: Yeah, and I think that's really our starting point here, is this is a pretty big synthesis effort to see what kind of patterns emerge when you put it all in the same place and start to see, instead of looking at it one by one.

Paul: So that's looking to the future. What is giving you inspiration then for the future, and about ocean industries and sustainability?

John: The, the hope and the inspiration is that I feel like globally we're talking about the ocean as a whole, and ocean conservation, and particularly the people who depend upon the ocean for food, and for jobs, and for their livelihoods, far more than we were say 20 or 30 years ago.

We have a UN Oceans conference coming up in, in the summer. We have more and more NGOs, civil society actors, scientists, young people who care about the state of the ocean as a whole and what it can provide for people.

And so that's what gives me hope is that we're talking about this now. There are more and more people working on ocean conservation, and with a view that we have to think about the people as well, and the people who depend upon the ocean fishing communities, coastal communities, um, as, as a system.

And so, that that really wasn't the case, at least in my view, years back. But whether it's governments, whether it's companies, um, more people are starting to think about, oh, how do we make ocean use, as a whole, more sustainable? How do we think about the health of the ocean, of the people who depend upon it?

Rather than just, you know, hey, we're gonna put up a wind turbine here, what does that mean? We are a shipping company, what is happening on our boats? We're starting to think much more about the broader ocean environment and the people who depend upon it, um, in society at large.

And young people, and we have more and more students showing up wanna study this, uh, more and more innovation happening. So that's what, what sort of gives me inspiration and hope is, this is not forgotten or, you know, lost in, in people's minds.

Paul: John, today has been brilliant. Thank you very much for joining us.

John: Well, thank you both for having me. It's been a lot of fun.

[Theme music]

Paul: Jan, do you think if I asked John nicely he'd be able to get me a tie, a jacket, all the accoutrements that may come with being a member of the Ocean 100 Club?

Jan: Well, it's quite interesting 'cause we tried so hard to build that club and, and, and it wasn't, nobody wanted to be a full member, so…

Paul: Sounds like there's spaces and vacancies to me [Jan laughs] that's where I can fit in…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: I know, it is interesting though, isn't it, that all of these companies struggle to a certain extent to recognise where their overlap is and how, as both yourself and John have said, there's still um, little bit of grey area, black area even, about what exactly happens, where it happens, when it happens.

Jan: And the other thing we realised, partly 'cause we know a lot about the SeaBOS experiment, and we know about the Ocean 100. SeaBOS came together, sort of 2015, 2016, there weren't that many clubs to join.

But by the time we're getting into, you know, just before the pandemic and during the pandemic, which also might have had an effect on the ability to build the Ocean 100 Club, then there were so many other things that people could be involved in, and were involved in.

So it made us realise that there's not an unlimited appetite or space for people to join together and do things, 'cause it's time consuming, even though the benefits are going to be there and are going to be long term, Um, yeah, it was a whole different, um, environment, um, as well as that difficulty of people recognising each other.

Paul: And it demonstrates yet again the vast variety of companies and businesses and their scopes that are operating on the oceans and having an effect on the oceans. And whether that it be that a vast majority of their operations on the oceans or a small part of it.

Jan: Absolutely. And you've got like container shipping, uh, the equipment manufacturers, um, energy sector, which includes your oil and gas as well as offshore renewables.

You've got the people with all the cables, you've got the cruise um liners, you've got seafood, you've got ports. So it's actually a really diverse set of activities.

Paul: I'm telling you, my cruise ship with a wind turbine [Jan laughs] catching fish and calling into ports, it's a goer…

Jan: [laughing] Well, it would certainly touch many of the bases. Um, yeah, an interesting idea.

Paul: Well, I, I also feel it could be some kind of like spy ship to spy on what all the other actors in the industry are getting up to, and at least that way you'd have more information on what the actors in the industry are getting up to and have it in one place, 'cause that sounds like that's a really big challenge trying to bring all that information together.

Jan: Yeah, and I guess, uh, the, the worry is, and one of the sectors that wasn't in that, which almost harks back to the asteroid mining, which is the deep sea mining. When the Ocean 100 was put together, there were no substantial deep sea mining companies, but obviously they're coming, um, into the, the play

now. So, so how you coordinate that and the idea of marine spatial planning, becomes really important because you can't do seafood and deep seed binding in the same place, for example.

So there's lots of, you know, space conflicts and, you know, the propagation of, um, impacts from one part of this industry to other parts of the industry as well.

Paul: You can't mine a lobster.

Jan: Um, no, you can't mine a lobster [laughs] It's not a phrase I ever thought I'd hear, but there we have it. That's why we do this.

Paul: An important lesson. Uh, but it sounds like John as well, he's got lots of experience. He says working with policy and now getting more experience working with business, and there's such an overlap there as well on the oceans and also the grey areas, as we say, 200 miles off anyone's coast, and then who's in charge of that?

What are the regulations there? Is anyone ever gonna put proper regulations for the high seas in place?

Jan: And there's overlapping regulations as well for different, yes.

Paul: Yeah.

Jan So it is, it is quite, um, it's quite chaotic, but again, uh, sort of in a way, going back to the asteroid mining example as well, those kind of problems of how you deal with that common space, uh, are therefore, sorry about the pun, space as well as for the ocean, um, outside of those territorial limits as well.

Paul: So what we need is just like with the space regulation, Luxembourg to lead the way…

Jan: [laughing] …yes indeed…

Paul: It doesn't have a coastline, but it can come up with the regulations. But, but joking aside, someone needs to lead the way, and that's what John talked about there. Getting people to focus on what's actually important and go and look and work in those areas.

Jan: And there is something, um, called the High Level Panel for the Ocean. And so there's, this is a series of countries who are thinking of taking, who wish

to take on that role. Um, and between them, they've got a fair amount of the, the ocean space is, is territorially, um, linked to them.

So in that respect, there is some movement among some countries that want to lead the way, but that's a bit of a bun fight as well as you can imagine.

Paul: Talking about bun fights, shall we talk more about food?

Jan: Yes, please.

Paul: Next week we're gonna be talking about food and catering, and also lots of other aspects of event hosting, and how that ties in with sustainability and whether it's possible to hold a sustainable event.

Jan: That's a very good question.

Paul: Because obviously there's lots of talk about, well should everything just be online now, to stop people traveling there to stop the use of resources when you go there, does that take away though, from the essence of the event in the first place?

Jan: Who's gonna tell us about that?

Paul: We're going to be talking to Hilary Barraclough, who is the Head of Business Development and Academic Events Services here at Lancaster University. And she's in charge of a branch of our university that organises a whole host of events across all the faculties.

[Theme music]

Jan: Brilliant.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]