Diving into the Blue Economy: what it is about and how it can transform coastal cities

— by Mons Badia & Mireia Tudurí

"What is the Blue Economy about?" many may wonder, as it is an emerging concept that has recently gained attention in discussions around cities, economy, and sustainability—especially considering that oceans cover 71% of the Earth's surface. Although there is no universally accepted definition, **the Blue Economy generally refers to all activities related to oceans, seas and coastal areas, promoting a transformation towards a sustainable use of water resources and areas**

This concept presents a significant **opportunity for cities to catalyze economic growth in innovative ways,** improve livelihoods, and create jobs while also protecting coastal and marine environments. However, as the open book it is, the Blue Economy can offer **a wide range of options and potentialities that require contextualization to the specific local reality** to become relevant.

The key question then becomes: **What are the main benefits and opportunities that the Blue Economy can offer to coastal cities?**

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Three integrated benefits and opportunities the Blue Economy offers to coastal cities

Building on our expertise in assisting cities and organizations with the Blue Economy, we will outline some key opportunities it presents to strengthen both existing and emerging sectors. By promoting an **interdisciplinary approach to raise awareness of marine ecosystems and enhancing social and economic welfare** for current and future generations, we invite you to dive into this ocean of new possibilities.

1 | Promoting urban revitalization through new innovation ecosystems

In recent years, the Blue Economy has **revitalized coastal areas of cities by linking harbors with city centers.** This approach creates opportunities for improved public spaces, vibrant city life, and closer connections with nature.

One notable example is **Barcelona's Olympic Port.** With Anteverti's support, **the city has strategically regenerated this area to provide accessible activities for both citizens and visitors while creating a new innovation hub** for economic activities related to the sea and its sustainability. Multipurpose areas and buildings have been developed for the **2024 America's Cup**, aiming to establish a legacy for

Barcelona's Olympic Port now hosts a Blue Economy Hub. © Anteverti

future cultural activities. Additionally, the Olympic Port is **upgrading its municipal sailing center to make nautical sports such as surfing, kayaking, and paddleboarding more accessible,** thereby popularizing these activities among local communities.

Indeed, the **Blue Economy creatively promotes maritime innovation,** which is one of its most exciting aspects. Coastal cities around the world are catalyzing innovation ecosystems by supporting Blue Economy start-ups and digital development solutions.

For instance, **the Port of Helsinki has committed to becoming carbon-neutral by 2035 and is encouraging other sectors and private companies to do the same.** Its Business Hub supports innovative, scalable solutions in the smart maritime field, ranging from autonomous ships to more efficient port operation management.

2 | Harnessing marine sports to drive sustainable economic activity

From surfing to diving, **sports and sports tourism can be powerful vehicles for promoting resilience, innovation, and the sustainable use of marine resources**—especially in small and medium coastal cities where these activities are often concentrated. With this in mind, **various initiatives and projects worldwide are inspiring communities to drive sustainable economic growth**, create jobs, promote environmental stewardship, and enhance the visibility of coastal urban realities.

Numerous scuba diving centers and global organizations, such as **Green Fins**, are dedicated to promoting responsible diving practices worldwide. This initiative encourages ecosystem preservation by providing guidelines to minimize the negative impacts of marine tourism on protected areas in countries like the Philippines, Thailand, and Costa Rica.

Research projects such as the **Red Sea Project and Nature Seychelles** also involve divers in monitoring species like turtles to collect data for scientific research. Other initiatives offer expeditions designed to raise awareness and protect the ocean, including seabed clean-up efforts.

Surfing, which is more than just a sport, offers significant benefits to local communities. **The surfing community is deeply connected to the environment**, reflected in its active engagement in social movements aimed at protecting coastlines, reducing pollution, and safeguarding

Rotterdam is one of the pionneering cities harnessing the potential of Blue Economy.

biodiversity. Organizations like the **Surfrider Foundation or Save the Waves Coalition** exemplify this commitment. However, much of the equipment used in surfing, such as fiberglass surfboards and petroleum-based wetsuits, remains harmful to the environment. In response, new eco-friendly materials are being developed, including biodegradable options like beeswax and wetsuits made from limestone, yulex, or water-based glue.

Sailing and regattas, which have a strong tradition, also contribute to this movement. B**arcelona recently hosted the 37th America's Cup, a global sailing event that embraces innovation, sustainability, and technology like no other,** while creating a significant economic and business impact for the host city. New engineering and sailing techniques, including hydrofoils and reduced CO2 emissions through the Chase Zero, have been developed in recent editions, and disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence are also employed to simulate boat design and race conditions.

3 | Fostering awareness among city stakeholders for environmental preservation

The Blue Economy offers **a powerful platform for raising environmental awareness** among citizens and city stakeholders. As coastal areas are revitalized, residents and local groups are increasingly committed to preserving maritime regions and preventing the overexploitation of oceans.

Cities are embracing this responsibility, demonstrating their ability to rise to the challenge. **Rotterdam exemplifies this commitment through its Blue City project**, where a former swimming pool complex has been transformed into a circular economy hub. Blue City hosts 55 entrepreneurs whose businesses range from circular architecture to sustainable breweries, showcasing how cities can advance toward a circular economy.

Notable non-city-led initiatives include **Emily Penn's eXXpedition**, a non-profit organization leading sailing research expeditions to find solutions to ocean plastic pollution, and Good Karma projects, which organize aquatic cleanups and citizen science efforts in collaboration with local governments to promote cleaner oceans.

Summing up: the Blue Economy as an open window for a sustainable urban world

The stated opportunities clearly indicate that **the Blue Economy is creating possibilities that had previously not been considered by regions and urban areas around the world.** From the chance to dynamize and connect city centers to their coastal harbors through pedestrian-friendly and greener public spaces to enhancing economic innovation and growth while fostering a healthier lifestyle, this concept is proving to be a growing industry.

As more cities and organizations explore how to integrate the Blue Economy into their territories, **we look forward to seeing how the balance between economic growth and the preservation of marine ecosystems will continue to evolve.** Additionally, we anticipate how governments, civil society, the private sector, and academic institutions will embrace this concept—and sail toward a more sustainable and competitive future.

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