



SUSTAINABILITY

Prada Group Creates Trust Fund With UNESCO for Sea Beyond



Lorenzo Bertelli and Audrey Azoulay sign the Sea Beyond Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Connecting People and Ocean in Nice, France.

● In an interview with WWD, the group's head of CSR Lorenzo Bertelli discusses the ambition of the ocean literacy project launched in 2019.

BY MARTINO CARRERA

MILAN — Prada Group is furthering its deep dive into ocean literacy and education, stepping up its Sea Beyond project.

Launched in 2019 in partnership with the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO, or UNESCO-IOC, the project announced Monday that it is creating the Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Connecting People and Ocean.

The announcement was made at the third United Nations Ocean Conference running through Friday in Nice, on France's Côte d'Azur. Prada Group is taking part in the conference with a range of events and activations.

Introduced concurrently with the launch of the Re-Nylon collection crafted from Econyl recycled nylon, Sea Beyond has grown its scope and reach in the past six years, reflecting Prada Group's commitment to culture at large, in addition to environmental sustainability.

"I think it's the natural lexicon of our group, it's part of our DNA. Of course, creating great products, designing beautiful things that people love, that's part of what we do. But the goal isn't just to sell products for the sake of it. The goal is to use these projects as vehicles for messages. I think that's always been part of our story, embedding messages, sometimes subliminal, in what we do. In this case, the messages are more explicit, more like statements," Lorenzo Bertelli, head of corporate social responsibility at Prada Group, told WWD.

"I really believe those who have more, must do more. The responsibility of luxury is also to show how business can be done in a way that has a positive impact on society, and to inspire others, whether people or other companies. No one's perfect, of course, but that's what matters most: to have an impact on the world we live in," he offered.

To this end, the creation of the trust fund — the first of its kind within UNESCO — is geared at furthering the activities of the Sea Beyond project to fuel ocean

education worldwide.

Prada Group is pledging an initial contribution of 2 million euros toward the trust fund, which will be open to additional financial contributors and partners starting in January 2026, a strategic shift for the Sea Beyond project.

The trust fund's governance will have a positive impact on its activities, Bertelli said.

Bertelli and Vidar Helgesen, executive secretary of the UNESCO-IOC, will sit on the executive committee, which will welcome new members as more partners join Sea Beyond next year.

"I think we've given [the fund] neutrality... by distancing it from being something of the group, it gains a different legitimacy, it becomes a more international platform, but most of all it gains neutrality, which helps in raising funds," Bertelli offered. "It will give Sea Beyond a different kind of credibility internationally, with both private and public entities," he said.

Now a trust fund, Sea Beyond will continue to focus on five key educational pillars, including "blue education" aimed at including ocean literacy and learning into school curricula; "youth empowerment and engagement" focused on youth and early career professionals to bring in ocean discussions at multiple scales; "ocean culture and heritage" to educate on the cultural connections between humans and the ocean in tackling global challenges; "science-policy-society interface" to promote adequate representation of societal needs into policy-making processes, and "strategic communication and narrative shifting" to promote targeted messages or actions focused on challenges faced by the ocean, sustainable responses and actionable solutions.

"The purpose of Sea Beyond is long-term, it's about creating a connection between people and the environment. And the ocean is one of the strongest tools for creating that connection. Kids love the water, the sea and once they fall in love with it, the bond becomes strong," Bertelli said.

Since its launch, Sea Beyond has spread ocean literacy with about 35,000 students globally.

"Today very few [entities] are really investing in or talking about working on future generations, meaning that the

solutions to today's problems entail not only short- and medium-term actions, but also long-term ones, which are simply education. It seems like a basic and obvious thing, but it's not, and we often forget it," he added.

"We must protect the ocean and rethink our relationship with it — and this change starts in the classroom," echoed Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO's director general, in a statement. "Through our Sea Beyond program, UNESCO and Prada are empowering a new generation to better understand and protect the ocean. This program will fund youth-led initiatives on every continent, enhancing ocean education and culture," she said.

Boasting a Scientific Committee which is to include experts across different areas of ocean science, whose names will be revealed at a later stage, the trust fund is to further foster synergies between the public and private sectors, with stakeholders spanning institutions, private companies, education providers, NGOs, educators and the scientific community.

The Scientific Committee will provide guidance and advice on projects eligible for financial support from the trust fund. The first call for proposals kicks off in December.

Bertelli said conversations with multiple potential partners, including U.N. member states, are already ongoing.

"It's something even member states are interested in, they're paying attention. Taking this step is helping us gain more support from the public sector as well as the private one," he offered.

As for private companies joining the fund, Bertelli underscored that it is ultimately tied to individual firms' areas of interest in environmental responsibility and sustainability.

"Some companies focus more on energy, others on reforestation. It depends on each company's strategy. Our goal is to explain the journey and the importance of ocean literacy and education. That said, we'll obviously try to bring them on board with our journey, but it's not that the other paths are wrong. There are many, and it depends on the individual company's priorities and interests," the executive said.

Further raising awareness on the project, Bertelli said that Sea Beyond is to launch initiatives in partnership with Luna Rossa, Prada Group's chairman and executive director Patrizio Bertelli's America's Cup venture. He declined to provide further details at this stage, beyond saying it's a natural fit.

Overall, Bertelli sees Sea Beyond as a changemaking agent on multiple levels.

"Let's remember that the United Nations — and UNESCO in particular — do a lot to support countries, especially the smaller ones that don't have the

strength to develop their own policies. They adopt policies developed under the U.N., whether from UNESCO or other U.N. agencies, and then implement them. So the goal is precisely to create ocean literacy programs that can be adopted independently by the member states within their national educational curricula. And that's something we hope will happen, not only elsewhere, but also in Italy. That's the real goal," Bertelli explained.

On Friday, Sea Beyond will announce a new project, the support to nonprofit organization Coral Gardeners, which focuses on coral restoration and related educational activities in French Polynesia, Fiji and Thailand. The announcement is to be made again inside Nice's palexpo "La Baleine" at the UNESCO-IOC's "Beyond Borders: Ocean Futures" pavilion.

Acknowledging that there is still work to be done, Bertelli said that Sea Beyond's awareness is trickling down to the broader public, Prada customers included.

"We're seeing the first signs, that it's starting to be recognized and seen also from the outside... [people] talk about Sea Beyond proactively... it's less frequent that I need to explain it," Bertelli said.

"A customer buying a Re-Nylon product may not yet know about Sea Beyond, they discover it afterwards. So right now, Sea Beyond isn't directly driving Re-Nylon purchases, and that's not even its purpose... If anything, it's the opposite: someone makes a more conscious choice by buying a Re-Nylon product and then understands that the 1 percent of the proceeds from the Prada Re-Nylon for Sea Beyond Collection contributes to something bigger," Bertelli said.

"The goal is to [educate] people who, when they grow up and have to make decisions, will do so with greater awareness, whether they become prime ministers, scientists, or simply thoughtful parents. That's really the point," he said. "That's what fashion does, in the end, it shapes trends, habits, and how people want to be seen in society. Fashion is deeply tied to social life," Bertelli said.

Sea Beyond-funded projects have so far included, among others, the "Kindergarten of the Lagoon" program, a series of outdoor education activities for preschool children in Venice launched in 2023; the support to the Japanese association SD Blue Earth, led by ichthyologist Sakana-Kun, to promote the importance of the ocean among children and younger generations, via lessons and workshops on the marine ecosystems of the Tokyo Bay; the support to the National Marine Educators Association in the U.S. to train the next generation of stewards for the ocean, with about 26 schools between the New York tri-state area and Hawaii enrolled; a partnership with Bibliothèques Sans Frontières to facilitate access to ocean education for children and young citizens in vulnerable communities through Ideas Box, a mobile multimedia center operating in several locations, including Naples in Italy, France, Burundi and Ivory Coast.

Last April Sea Beyond cut the ribbon of the Ocean Literacy Centre, codigned by architectural firm CRA-Carlo Ratti Associati and UNESCO-IOC on Venice's island of San Servolo, a cultural hub in the Venetian lagoon. The venue provides a deep dive into ocean culture on a macro and micro scale, respectively spotlighting the "Spilhaus Projection," a map designed by geophysicist and oceanographer Athelstan Spilhaus in 1942 presenting the ocean as a single interconnected body of water, and the Venetian lagoon's biodiversity and tide mechanism. It also boasts an interactive room for visitors to envision concrete human actions to safeguard the oceans.