"Advancing Deep-Sea Scientific Knowledge and Data Innovation in the Area"
Call for Project Proposals under the ISA-China Joint Training and Research Center.

1. Context

Pursuant to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1 and the 1994 Agreement relating to the Implementation of Part XI of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 (UNCLOS), the International Seabed Authority (ISA) is mandated to promote and encourage the conduct of marine scientific research in the Area and to coordinate and disseminate the results when available.[1] In addition, ISA has the responsibility to encourage the development of appropriate programmes to strengthen the capacity of developing and technologically less-developed States.[2]

In 2020, the ISA members adopted an Action Plan on Marine Scientific Research (MSR Action Plan) in support of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. The MSR Action Plan organizes activities across six Strategic Research Priorities. Since its adoption, significant progress has been made across all six priorities, as reported annually by the ISA Secretary-General to the Assembly.[3]

To support ISA in its MSR and capacity development responsibilities, Section 3 of UNCLOS provides for the establishment of 'National and Regional Marine Scientific and Technological Centres'.[4] In this context, the International Seabed Authority - China Joint Training and Research Centre (ISA-China JTRC) was established in 2020 as the first-ever joint national training and research center.[5]

ISA-China JTRC supports the Authority's responsibilities in capacity-building. Since its inception, over 70 participants from developing States have benefited from training workshops organized under the framework of the MSR Action Plan. Another function of ISA-China JTRC consists of facilitating collaborative research programs to further advance the MSR Action Plan.

For the 2026-2027 cycle, JTRC will bring together research teams from China and developing countries—particularly Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)—to undertake joint deep-sea research projects under two research directions related to data analysis and management. These projects aim to advance key priorities of the Marine Scientific Research (MSR) Action Plan, promote marine scientific research in the Area, contribute to the protection of the marine environment, and stimulate technological development in deep-sea resource exploration in support of the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources.

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[1] United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, art. 143 (2).
[2] Capacity-development, training and technical assistance - International Seabed Authority
[3] ISBA/27/A/4, ISBA/28/A/8, ISBA/29/A/5
[4] PREAMBLE TO THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE LAW OF THE SEA
[5] ISA-China Joint Training and Research Centre - International Seabed Authority

2. Research directions, activities and outcomes

Project proposals are invited under the following two research directions:

Direction 1: Scientific Biological Data Analysis and Management in Deep-Sea Habitats

Key activities envisioned under this direction include:
- Conduct a scientific review of biological data contained in ISA's DeepData database, as well as a compilation of biological data publicly available from other global taxonomic databases and published peer-reviewed literature for selected priority region.
- Identify priorities for taxonomic identification and description of deep-sea species using scientific criteria underpinning spatial and non-spatial environmental management measures (e.g. biogeographic importance, ecological significance, vulnerability, connectivity, among others). Assess biodiversity metrics across the region and validate existing habitat suitability models using newly collected data.
- Develop species identification tools, such as a regional species checklist and/or catalogue，as recently developed for the Clarion Clipperton Zone detailing the taxonomy, distribution, and ecological characteristics for the prioritized region such as the Indian Ocean and/or North West Pacific. Assess biodiversity metrics across the region and validate existing habitat suitability models using newly collected data.

The expected outcomes include:
- Technical study describing results of biological data analysis, including bio-geographic distribution and assessment of needs and priorities for taxonomic data standardization in the study region(s) and for identifying biological indicators of characteristic habitats across the region(s).
- Regional species checklists to aid in species identification and descriptions in selected regions in the Area and available for future taxonomic projects and collaborations.

Direction 2: Historical data scientific analysis, new data processing and machine learning techniques for DeepData

Key activities envisioned under this direction include:
- Data Cleaning and Validation: collaborate with ISA's Data Management Division to access and clean historic data, identify and rectify inconsistencies, errors, and missing data points, implement robust validation processes to verify the accuracy and reliability of cleaned data sets.
- Statistical Modelling and Recommendations: Develop statistical models to analyse cleaned data sets and extract meaningful insights; Identify patterns, correlations, and anomalies within the data that will inform decision-making processes; Generate recommendations for further data quality improvements and initiatives based on statistical findings and insights.
- Digitization of Reporting Templates: Convert existing VBS scripting used in Excel macros into modern web-based JavaScript applications; Develop intuitive online web forms that replicate the functionalities of current reporting templates; Facilitate increased data submission rates through streamlined online reporting processes, ensure user-friendly interfaces accessible across various devices and browsers; Enable real-time validation during data entry to minimize errors and inconsistencies.

The expected outcomes include:

- The best available data including the historical data readily usable for scientific analysis. To improve data quality through comprehensive data cleaning, validation, and statistical modelling; to leverage the expertise of data scientists to enhance the integrity and reliability of historic data held by the ISA.
- New data mining and machine learning tools designed, utilizing Excel macros with VBS scripting and other modern tools to digitize existing reporting templates into online-based web forms, integrating modern JavaScript technologies.

3. Guidelines for submission of project proposals

Research consortia:
Research consortia applying should comprise of at least two research teams, including one from developing countries and one from China, both with relevant background and expertise. The consortium maybe self-organized, or, if necessary, ISA-China JTRC can assist in its formation. The consortium must designate a project leader responsible for coordinating the research program's implementation, managing scientific progress, overseeing personnel, and handling financial management.

Eligibility of the proponents:
Proposals can be submitted by a Chinese organization on behalf of academic and scientific institutions; non-governmental organizations, whose purposes or activities are related to the work of ISA and private foundations with a scientific mission and scientific team.

Instructions for submission:
- All applications must be submitted in English using the forms attached in Annex A and Annex B to the present call for proposals.
- Save your proposal using the following format: "Last Name First Name_JTRC 2026 Proposal_Direction#"
- Proposal must be submitted no later than **30th April 2026 at jtrc@isa.org.jm**
- Please email the full proposal with the subject line of the email clearly indicating either "Direction 1" or "Direction 2."
- Only complete proposals presented through the formats provided will be considered.

4. Selection process

The research proposals will be received by the ISA Secretariat and reviewed for eligibility and admissibility in cooperation with the JTRC Secretariat. Eligible research proposals will then be jointly evaluated according to the following criteria: track record of publications in the field, scientific novelty, proposed methodology, knowledge outputs ambitioned and involvement of early-career scientists and gender balance. Previous collaboration among consortium partners will be considered an added value. A ranked list of proposals, based on these criteria will be provided to the ISA-China Steering Committee that approves the projects.

5. Fund allocation, duration and timeline

The fund for the joint research programs from 2025 to 2026 is RMB 783000 (about USD 110000). The budget for each direction is approximately RMB 260000 (about USD 36600).

The funds for research programs may be allocated for procuring experimental materials, acquiring scientific literature, publishing and printing, attending conferences, expert consultations and labor expenses. Additionally, the funds can cover travel expenses, accommodation, communication, and living allowances necessary for international exchanges.

All funding for the research programmes is provided by the China Ocean Development Foundation. The research programs are expected to span maximum 20 months. ISA-China JTRC will initiate the programs and transfer 40% of the research fund of each programs one month after the start of the project. By the end of June 2026, ISA-China JTRC track the progress of joint research projects, and transfer the remaining 60% of the research fund. By the end of December 2026 at the latest, the research consortium is required to submit a project completion report. Following this, the JTRC will conduct the final project completion assessment to conclude the initiative.

6. Grant agreement and monitoring

The affiliated institutions of the ISA-China JTRC shall sign an agreement with the research consortium as per the decision of the Steering Committee, and allocate research funds to each participating institutions within the research consortium, accordingly.