

## Protection of the Caspian Sea Environment in the Framework of the Iranian State Approach

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the dominant discourse of the Iranian state's approach to marine environmental protection. The study tries to explore the Iranian discourse's Central Signifier, components, a chain of equivalence and alienation. Laclau and Mouffe's critical discourse analysis method has been used based on the Caspian Sea upstream documents in the period of 1921-2022. The results of the study showed that the main discourse during this period was environmental protection which seems different from the (Othering) discourse as all stakeholders have not been considered. The discursive elements of this discourse are the discursive hegemony of the protection of the marine environment of the Caspian Sea, attention to the legal regime of the Caspian Sea in the framework of cooperation, attention to non-pollution, control, and monitoring of the environment, evaluation Environmental effects, attention to education, public awareness, research, and continuous reports. The results also showed the supporting evidence of the Central Signifier (environmental discourse) are: minimizing the risks of oil pollution accidents, adopting the best environmental practices, comprehensive reporting on the status of plant species, the priority protecting the living aquatic resources of the Caspian Sea over their commercial use, combating illegal, unreported, irregular fishing and illegal trading of living aquatic resources, designing and compiling monitoring databases and using the Caspian Sea for peaceful purposes. The results of the study suggested policymakers should provide the necessary opportunities for the participation of all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Iran marine environment, Caspian Sea, Conservation Discourse, Discourse of Environmental-Centered, Responsible Participation.

## INTRODUCTION

The role of the oceans and seas in human life today is undeniable, especially as the use of their unknown capacities becomes clearer to humans' day by day. Oceans and seas are fundamental to human life, supporting ecological balance, economic prosperity, and global well-being. Coastal and marine ecosystems provide essential services such as food resources, climate regulation, and public health benefits through their influence on air quality and disease control (Lakshmi, 2021).

From an economic perspective, marine environments generate billions of dollars annually through fisheries, energy production, and maritime trade (Mehvar et al., 2018). The concept of the sustainable ocean economy highlights the central role of seas in transportation networks, employment creation, and international commerce (OECD, 2025). Moreover, marine and coastal zones are key drivers of tourism, offering opportunities for recreation, cultural exchange, and economic diversification in coastal regions (Caparrós-Martínez et al., 2022).

However, increasing industrialization, pollution, and overexploitation threaten the resilience of marine ecosystems worldwide. Understanding and protecting these vital systems have therefore become global priorities for sustainable development and human well-being. The Caspian Sea, as the world's largest enclosed inland water body, plays a vital ecological, economic, and geopolitical role for its littoral states (UNEP, 2024).

In recent decades, growing industrialization, coastal development, and intensive resource exploitation have led to serious environmental degradation in the region (Ryzhenkov, 2024). Iran, as one of the major coastal states, has increasingly recognized the necessity of adopting a comprehensive state-based approach to marine environmental protection (Voynova, 2023). National legislation, regional cooperation under the Tehran Convention, and integration of international norms have shaped the country's environmental governance framework (UNEP, 2024; Voynova, 2023). However, challenges such as weak enforcement mechanisms, transboundary pollution, and climate-induced hydrological changes continue to hinder sustainable management (Sharifi Garmdareh et al., 2023).

Some scholars argue that states are the primary actors in regulating the use and protection of marine areas, but state sovereignty is stratified and the degrees of authority decrease further from the coastline. Since vast ocean spaces are beyond the exclusive control of any particular territorial state, political authority must first be established beyond areas of national jurisdiction to enable collective decision-making (Mondre & Kuhn, 2025). Strengthening Iran's institutional capacity and aligning state policies with regional commitments remain essential for the long-term protection of the Caspian Sea ecosystem (Ryzhenkov, 2024; UNEP, 2024).

With 750 km of coastline along the Caspian Sea and about 2250 km of coastline along the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea, Iran faces a variety of opportunities and limitations for the blue economy. The northern coasts of Iran next to the Caspian Sea have a mild and pleasant climate (Pak and Farajzadeh, 2007). The Caspian Sea is a body of water that borders Iran from the south, Russia from the north, Russia and the Republic of Azerbaijan from the west, and Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan from the east (Karimi Firozjaei et al 2023). The Caspian Sea plays an essential role in the economy of the coastal states because it is considered a rich resource in terms of oil and non-oil reserves, and as the largest lake in the world with its biodiversity, rich oil and fishery resources, it is strategically one of the It has become the most important places in the world, especially in recent years (Kafai Fard and Mirzapour, 2021: 251).

The environment of the Caspian Sea is facing a challenge due to the non-implementation of environmental agreements by the coastal countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) and the emergence of new coastal countries on the edge of the Caspian Sea have caused the unique water area of the Caspian Sea to be affected by numerous and diverse pollutants. The sensitivity and fragility of the environment of the Caspian Sea due to its closed environment and the accumulation of various pollutants have faced this sea with an ecological crisis (Vahid and Shaisteh, 2013).

Through this research, an analysis of documents related to the Caspian Sea and in connection with decision-making and policy-making organizations in the field of sea-oriented development is done. For the analysis of these documents, two points have been taken into consideration: firstly, the period investigated (1921-2022), and secondly, the subject axis of the investigated documents.

The documents related to the Caspian Sea are divided into several parts: the first part is the environmental documents related to the activities of ships, the discussion of protection and improvement of the environment, and river beds. The second part is legal documents related to the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Sea of Oman. The third part is all the materials, notes and layers extracted by the authors to adopt an article view of policies, laws and guidelines related to the Caspian Sea. In this study, we employed the Laclau and Mouffe approach to discourse analysis to examine the Iranian government's discourse on the protection of the Caspian Sea environment. This approach views politics and language not as reflections of reality, but as arenas in which meaning is constructed where actors shape social reality through the articulation of concepts and signs. Accordingly, "protection of the Caspian environment" is not a fixed concept, but a discourse whose meaning is stabilized

through interaction and confrontation with competing discourses (such as economic development, national interests, or regional cooperation).

In the course of this analysis, we sought to apply key concepts from this theoretical framework, such as the *Central Signifier*, *Articulation*, and *Hegemony*. First, official texts, statements, and policy documents of the Iranian government were examined in order to identify the main signifiers within the environmental discourse. Then, the ways in which these signifiers are linked to other concepts such as “national security,” “sustainable development,” and “international cooperation” were analyzed, with the aim of revealing the mechanisms through which the meaning of “protection of the Caspian Sea” is stabilized within the official discourse.

In this way, Laclau and Mouffe’s theory helps the research demonstrate how the Iranian government, through language and discourse, constructs a particular image of its relationship with the Caspian Sea environment, and how this image takes shape in competition or overlap with other political and economic discourses. Therefore, the focus of this study is on the discursive construction of the meaning of “protection” within governmental discourse, rather than merely on environmental policies or technical measures. Therefore, according to the available materials, the main question of the current research are:

- What is the dominant discourse in Iran’s strategic documents on the Caspian Sea (1921–2022)?
- How is this discourse constructed (its central signifier, chains of equivalence, and antagonisms)?
- What are the practical implications and limitations of this discourse for inclusive environmental governance?

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The Caspian Sea region is of special importance from the point of view of global and regional environmental security. The new geopolitical and economic conditions have created a mix of competition. Reluctant cooperation and legal, political, economic and ideological conflicts. There is a fierce debate about how to divide the Caspian Sea and its resources among the coastal countries and how to develop these resources. While most coastal countries and international companies are trying to develop the region's huge hydrocarbon potential, it is clear that the unique and fragile Caspian ecosystem is at risk (Ascher and Mirovitskaya, 2000).

Before critically examining the upstream documents, it is necessary to divide this method into several components. Discourse components, equivalence chain, Central Signifier and Othering. The use of the discourse analysis method shows whether the protection of the environment of the Caspian Sea is reflected in the upstream documents of the sea - in the time frame under investigation - or not. In this section, sampling, data collection and variables used in the analysis and the method used are explained.

### Sampling and Data Collection

In this research, all the upstream sea documents that were compiled in the period of 1921-2022 were collected. These documents were a collection of laws, instructions, plans and programs, including legal and non-legal laws. In this research, 38 cases of laws, regulations, instructions and approval letters related to port areas that were compiled between 1994 and 2017 were removed because these documents are mainly related to the formation of specific economic, industrial, commercial and Topics like this. as labor and employment of employees and insurance, the criteria for registering companies and their intellectual property.

The method of collecting laws, programs, policies and instructions was the websites of the Islamic Council and the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran. In this way, a total of 20 documents from the Documents of upstream of the sea were analyzed, so the sampling was of the full number type.

The reason for selecting these 20 documents is that they cover a wide range of topics, including documents related to transportation, environmental impact assessments, biodiversity, the security of the Caspian Sea, pollution prevention, laws on illegal fishing, and more. We deliberately excluded a few laws such as the Ports and Shipping Organization Regulations (1969), the Law on the Protection of Border Seas and Rivers from Pollution by Oil Substances (1975), and the Maritime Law (1964). The reason for this exclusion was our intention to focus on a broad spectrum of laws from the past 100 years that specifically concern the Caspian Sea. At the same time, some of these documents were shared with the Caspian littoral states, meaning that certain documents were national while others were international. This helped us gain a more comprehensive understanding of the overall trend governing the drafting of these documents. In addition, we selected the period from 1921 to 2022, covering slightly more than a century, in order to analyze the dominant discourse reflected in the Caspian Sea’s strategic and policy documents over this time span.

## Analysis Process

In the first stage, a collection of official documents from the Government of Iran including statements issued by the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Environment, and national development plans was examined. The texts were carefully read several times to identify key concepts and linguistic patterns related to “environment,” “development,” “regional cooperation,” and “national interests.”

These concepts were then categorized into initial codes such as environmental security, national independence, international cooperation, and shared responsibility. In the next step, these codes were reorganized into broader themes such as the “development-oriented discourse” and the “international responsibility discourse.”

In this research, the unit of analysis consisted of semantic units or key propositions in which concepts related to the Caspian Sea environment or Iran’s role in this context were expressed. These units typically included several interconnected sentences that conveyed a specific idea or standpoint. The analysis was conducted manually and through repeated readings of the texts to preserve the researcher’s sensitivity to the discursive context.

Since some official documents concerning the Caspian Sea were published in both Persian and English, the primary analysis was based on the original Persian texts. For English-language materials, specialized translations were prepared and compared with the original versions to ensure accurate conveyance of meaning and discursive tone. In cases of ambiguity, two parallel translations were used, and key concepts were reviewed in consultation with language experts. (Grammar-checking software was also used to assist in this process.) Finally, the coding process was carried out individually rather than as a team-based effort.

The data were analyzed using the discourse analysis method of Laclau and Mouffe, and the discourse components, the Central Signifier, the chain of equivalence and the othering of the discourse governing the upstream documents were extracted from among the upstream documents. After that, examples of the discourse components, the Central Signifier, the chain of equivalence and alienation of the ruling discourse, was presented in the form of tables. The type of document and the number of materials/notes are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The upstream documents of the sea basin in the time period (1921-2022)

Number of Materials	Language	Document Type	Upstream Documents	Source of documents
25 Article	Persian	Announcement (October 16, 2007)	Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Turkmenistan	Taken from the website of the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website
15 Article	Persian	Statement (November 18, 2010)	Joint statement Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Turkmenistan	
19 Article	Persian	Announcement ((September 29, 2014)	Declaration of the Presidents Azerbaijan Republic, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Turkmenistan	
	Persian	Contract (March 25 ,1940)	Contract Trade and navigation between the imperial government of Iran and the political Soviet Union	
37 Article	Persian	Law (November 4, 2003)	Framework convention law for the protection of Marine environment of the Caspian Sea	Taken from the website of the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website
-----	Persian	Statement (August 12, 2018)	The fifth Caspian summit	
24 Articles	Persian	Law (August 5, 2012)	Law on the accession of the Protocol on Regional Preparedness, Response and Cooperation in Combating Oil Pollution Accidents to the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea	
22 Articles	Persian	Law (July 19, 2017)	Law on Cooperation Agreement on Prevention and Response to Emergency Situations in the Caspian Sea	
14 Articles	Persian	Law (August 9, 2015)	Law on Cooperation Agreement on Caspian Sea Hydrometeorology	
24 Articles	Persian	Convention(August 12, 2018)	Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea	

18 Articles	Persian	Law (September 29, 2014)	Law on the Agreement on the Conservation and Optimal Use of Living Aquatic Resources of the Caspian Sea	
26 Articles	Persian	Treaty of (February 26, 1921)	Treaty of Amity between Iran and Russia signed in Moscow	
15 Articles	Persian	Law (November 18, 2010)	Law on the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Security in the Caspian Sea	
23 Articles	Persian-English	Bill (January 20, 2018)	Bill Protocol on Transboundary Environmental Impact Assessment to the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea	
29 Articles	Persian	Law (August 9, 2015)	Law on the approval of the Protocol for the Protection of the Caspian Sea against Pollution from Land-Based Sources and Activities	
30 Articles	Persian	Law (May 30, 2014)	Law on the Protocol on the Conservation of Biological Diversity	
12 Articles	Persian	Law (August 12, 2018)	Law on the Agreement between the littoral states of the Caspian Sea on transport	
21 Articles	Persian, Kazakh, Russian and English	Law (December 22, 2016)	Law on the Agreement on Commercial Maritime Navigation in the Caspian Sea	Taken from the website of the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website
8 Articles	Persian	Bill (July 26, 1979)	Bill to punish illegal fishing in the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf	
18 Articles	Azeri, Persian, Kazakh, Russian, Turkmen and English	Law (August 12, 2018)	Law on the Additional Protocol on Cooperation in Combating Organized Crime	

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Discourse components affecting the upstream documents of the Caspian Sea in the period (1921-2022)

Hegemony of the discourse on the protection of the marine environment of the Caspian Sea: The review of the documents of the Caspian Sea shows that one of the most important goals stated in the documents is the protection of the environment of the Caspian Sea. The framework convention for the protection of the marine environment of the Caspian Sea, which was recently concluded between the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan, is a big step in the long way to saving the fragile environment of the Caspian Sea, which has been destroyed by the economies of these countries. Coastal countries, unsustainable exploitation of non-living seabed resources, and the negative impact of illegal fishing. This convention complies with all current standards of modern international environmental law and should be considered as part of the gradual development of international laws on environmental protection (Janusz, 2005). Regarding the environmental protection component, the research results of Janusz (2005) show that the Caspian Sea Marine Environment Protection Framework Convention which was recently signed between Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan closed, a big step in the long road to save the fragile environment of the Caspian Sea, which has been destroyed by the economies of the countries.

*Quotes from documents: The Contracting Parties (Coastal States of the Caspian Sea) shall cooperate with each other to protect and restore migratory species. (Law on the Protocol on the Conservation of Biological Diversity- Article 4- J -2014)*

*Priority given to the protection of the living aquatic resources of the Caspian Sea over their commercial use; (Law on the Agreement on the Conservation and Optimal Use of Living Aquatic Resources of the Caspian Sea, Article 4-1-2014)*

The discursive hegemony of paying attention to the legal regime of the Caspian Sea in the framework of cooperation: The collapse of the former Soviet Union removed the Caspian Sea region from a pure and peaceful geographical position and created many geopolitical opportunities and challenges for Iran and Russia. This fundamental development caused a change in the political borders around the Caspian Sea and also affected the legal regime of this sea. (Declaration of heads of coastal countries, 2007).

*Quotes from documents: The absence of armed forces that do not belong to the parties in the Caspian Sea (Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, Article 3-7. 2018)*

*The Parties shall cooperate in the prevention and response to emergencies in accordance with their national laws and generally accepted international standards and based on the principles of (Law on Cooperation Agreement on Prevention and Response to Emergency Situations in the Caspian Sea, Article 3.2017)*

Discourse hegemony paying attention to education, public awareness research and presenting continuous reports: The analysis of the Caspian Sea upstream documents shows that one of the patterns of interest in maritime training in the documents is the emphasis on training programs for the activities of port areas so that people can get the information needed to live in these areas. The findings of the documents show that environmental, hydrological and interdisciplinary experts and experts who continue their studies on the Caspian Sea should identify dangerous environmental activities in order to prevent living aquatic resources with the risk of shortage in the long term. Rare species should not be encountered. Paying attention to education and public awareness, along with research and reporting on the status of the Caspian Sea, was another component of discourse analysis. In this regard, the results of the research by Moal et al (2012) showed that the coastal areas of the Caspian Sea due to the imbalance between activity Tourism and tourism have been exposed to critical conditions of losing their attractiveness. The operation of the natural environment of sustainable tourism development can be a suitable solution to solve the problem.

*Quotes from documents: Exchange of experiences, including participation, consultations, workshops and training courses (Law on Additional Protocol on Cooperation in Combating Organized Crime, Article 3. 2018)*

*The Contracting States (Caspian Sea littoral States) shall cooperate on the training and upgrading of the skills of transport professionals (Law on the Agreement between the littoral states of the Caspian Sea in the field of transport, Article 3-6. 2018)*

The findings of the documents show that environmental, hydrological and interdisciplinary experts and experts who continue their studies on the Caspian Sea should identify dangerous environmental activities in order to prevent living aquatic Resources with the risk of shortage in the long term. Rare species should not be encountered.

*Quotes from documents: At the earliest opportunity, inform other Contracting Parties that may be affected and the Secretariat of any conditions that are likely to endanger the ecosystems of protected areas or the survival of threatened species (Law on the Protocol on the Conservation of Biological Diversity, Article 3-P, 2014)*

Discourse hegemony regarding non-pollution, environmental control and monitoring: One of the important discourse elements obtained from the analysis of documents upstream of the Caspian Sea is attention to the quality of the Caspian Sea in such a way that all industrial activities, agriculture, sewage discharge and the activity of vessels should be under international standards and in line with maintaining the health of living aquatic life in the Caspian Sea. In relation to the component of non-pollution and its control and monitoring in the Caspian Sea, the results of Farjami et al (2023) showed that not only the ecosystem of the shores of the South Caspian Sea but also their marine ecosystem is exposed to different environmental pollutions, so it can be a waste Absorb, concentrate and transport floating plastics, larvae, pollutants and toxic pollutants in this basin.

*Quotes from documents: Preventing, controlling, and reducing the release of pollutants from polluting sources, including through the use of technology that produces zero or little waste (Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment Caspian Sea, Article 7-2-A.2003)*

*Ensuring the functioning and development of national observation networks, including stations and bases located on coasts, islands, and river mouths, and establishing new stations or bases if necessary. (Law on Cooperation Agreement on Caspian Sea Meteorology, Article 3, 2015)*

The Discursive Hegemony of Environmental Impact Assessment: Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is a comprehensive assessment of the likely effects of a project that will significantly affect the environment. The EIA provides decision-makers with an indication of the possible environmental consequences of their chosen policies (Mouter, 2021). The EIA is a tool for territory management that is used to examine environmental changes caused by constructions such as roads, industrial plants, etc. It occurs during the operation phase and is required to obtain a construction or operation permit (Lizarraga and Picallo-Perez, 2020). The research results of Nejat et al, (2018) regarding the environmental impact assessment showed that considering that the challenges forced the coastal countries to conclude the framework convention for the protection of the marine environment of the Caspian Sea in 2003. The long period of time for the ratification of this convention and its two protocols, the lack of importance of the other two protocols, the competition over energy issues in the sea and the conflict of opinions on the legal regime have affected the level of cooperation of the five coastal countries in this field.

*Quotes from documents: Taking into account the likely significant adverse transboundary impacts of an activity for which an environmental impact assessment has been carried out pursuant to this Protocol, the Parties concerned shall, upon request of either Party, determine whether post-project analysis would be beneficial and, if so, to what extent it would be implemented. (Law on the Additional Protocol on Transboundary Environmental Impact Assessment to the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea, Article 3-7. 2018)*

*Time frame for reviewing environmental impact assessment documents by the affected party, which will not exceed 90 days. (Time frame for reviewing environmental impact assessment documents by the affected party, which will not exceed 90 days. Law on the Additional Protocol on Transboundary Environmental Impact Assessment to the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea, Article 3-7. 2018)*

## **The Chain of Equivalence of the Environmental Protection Discourse against the Responsible and Participatory Discourse**

In the discourse of environmental protection governing the upstream documents of the Caspian Sea in the considered time period (1921-2022), one can find a set of cases that can clearly strengthen the idea of the discourse of environmental protection against the discourse of participation. One of these cases is the importance of individual and joint actions in order to minimize the risks of oil pollution accidents, according to the review of the Caspian Sea upstream documents. The law states that the risks of oil pollution, including "oil pollution incidents" means an event or series of events with the same origin that lead to or can lead to the discharge of oil and threaten or can threaten the marine environment or coastlines and require emergency action or other immediate response. Marine accidents caused by oil pollution are one of the factors that cause accidents in the marine industry. With the increase in the amount of oil extraction and the number of oil platforms, the probability of accidents due to oil leakage from pipes to the sea increases. Weather is effective in the occurrence of oil pollution accidents. (Chenhao & Yupeng, 2021).

Among other factors that can be mentioned in the form of the equivalence chain of environmental protection discourse; adopting the best environmental practices means applying the most appropriate combination of measures and strategies for environmental control.

Providing a comprehensive report on the status of threatened plant and animal species is one of the other things that strengthen the discourse of environmental protection. Destruction of plants and animals is one of the consequences of pollution. Exploitation of Caspian Sea oil and gas creates new challenges for the environmental ecosystem. Natural resources of the environment are a source of potential wealth. Therefore, they can easily increase the conflict (Nasrollahzadeh, 2010).

The priority of protecting the living water resources of the Caspian Sea over their commercial use is another thing that strengthens the idea of environmental discourse. This priority, with the help of ideas such as: The protection of the ecological system and biodiversity of aquatic biological resources in the Caspian Sea, the use of scientific research as the basis for the protection of living aquatic resources and the management of common aquatic resources and the implementation of conservation measures can be operationalized.

The fight against illegal, unreported, illegal fishing and illegal trading of living aquatic resources are other factors to strengthen the discourse of environmental protection. Among the measures formulated in the law to prevent illegal fishing are the use of selective nets, pre-fishing assessment in order to preserve and protect rare species and ensure the exploitation of species that are less at risk.

One of the important measures regarding the chain of equivalence of the Caspian Sea environmental protection discourse is the design and compilation of the monitoring database of the features related to the status of the Caspian Sea; (Law on cooperation agreement regarding water and meteorology of the Caspian Sea, 18 August, 2015) In general, data collection in order to continuously and continuously examine the climatic, biological, hydrological and even legal status of the Caspian Sea is one of the measures that the policy-maker repeatedly and It has been constantly mentioned in the form of rules and notes. Because designing and compiling the database of all countries along with holding bilateral and multilateral meetings informs the coastal countries participating in the Caspian Sea about the climatic and biological situation.

One of the other cases that can be used in the chain of equivalence of the discourse is the use of the Caspian Sea for peaceful purposes. The analysis of the upstream documents of the Caspian Sea showed that in all the legal, biological and international laws of the Caspian Sea, there are issues such as the development of cooperation between the five coastal countries, friendship, neighborliness, accountability based on the basic interests of nations, solving all issues considering resources, efforts The parties (five littoral countries) to turn the Caspian region into a region of peace and stability, implement the final agreement regarding the delimitation of borders and bases, refusal to use military force in mutual relations, not allowing countries to use the territory and military attacks, prohibiting Mentioning and proliferation of nuclear weapons, opposing interference in the affairs of independent countries and condemning any international terrorism; has been emphasized (Declaration of the presidents of the parties , 2014).

The equivalence chain, which actually reinforces the central signifier (environmental protection discourse), is the best representative of the environmental protection approach of upstream documents (1921 to 2022) in the Caspian Sea. The existence of this chain shows that Caspian Sea policymakers have tried to make seabed protection a top priority in meteorological, environmental, criminal and legal laws, and other documents related to the Caspian Sea.

The modern, largely academic and urban concern for environmental protection of landscapes, species, watersheds, biodiversity, ecosystem services, etc., is couched in language that suggests that the primary concern is to protect and preserve fragile resources of common interest to humankind. Therefore, it seems that the values that deserve the attention of environmental protection are very different from the concerns that shape the

evolution of traditional communities: controlling access and extracting resources that are limited but necessary for the survival of local communities (Berge, 2003).

In line with the discourse of environmental protection, the research findings of Mahoutchian and Tayibi (2018) showed that environmental threats have brought great risks and human rights have been attacked in the confrontation between natural and human environment. Therefore, strengthening international convergence in order to achieve environmental protection is considered as a necessary value and policy framework and a serious priority, and it is a basic strategy to curb environmental risks and an effective approach to balance sustainable development.

**Table 2:** Chains of equivalence of environmental protection discourse versus responsible and participation-oriented discourse

Sample speech	Program type	Type of Chains of equivalence
Monitor sources of pollution and any activities that have or may have a significant negative impact on habitats and species	Law on the Protocol on the Conservation of Biological Diversity, <i>Article 5-D</i> , 2014	<b>the importance of individual and joint actions in order to minimize the risks of oil pollution accidents</b>
The Contracting Parties shall take all appropriate measures to prevent, control, reduce and, as far as possible, eliminate pollution of the marine environment and coastal areas resulting from changes in sea level. To this end, they shall protect oil and chemical installations and oil-contaminated lands which are subject to a potential threat of flooding	Law on the approval of the Protocol for the Protection of the Caspian Sea against Pollution from Land-Based Sources and Activities <i>Article 5-2</i> , 2015	<b>the importance of individual and joint actions in order to minimize the risks of oil pollution accidents</b>
The Parties, realizing their responsibility to present and future generations for the protection of the Caspian Sea and the integrity of its ecological system, emphasize the importance of expanding cooperation in resolving environmental issues, including the coordination of national environmental protection activities and joint efforts with international environmental protection organizations, in order to create a regional system, preserve and maintain biological diversity, rational use, reproduction and breeding of living resources	Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Turkmenistan, <i>Article 11</i> , 2007	<b>Adopting the best environmental practices means applying the most appropriate combination of measures and strategies for environmental control.</b>
Taking specific protective measures against pollution from land-based sources and activities that potentially harm the natural spawning grounds of sturgeon, Caspian salmon and other valuable species	Law on the approval of the Protocol for the Protection of the Caspian Sea against Pollution from Land-Based Sources and Activities, <i>Article 4-G</i> , 2015	<b>Providing a comprehensive report on the status of threatened plant and animal species</b>
The priority of protecting the living water resources of the Caspian Sea over their commercial use	Law on the Agreement on the Conservation and Optimal Use of Living Aquatic Resources of the Caspian Sea, <i>Article 4-1</i> , 2014	<b>The priority of protecting the living water resources of the Caspian Sea over their commercial use</b>
Applying generally accepted international rules accepted by the Parties regarding fisheries management and conservation of living aquatic resources of the Caspian Sea	Law on the Agreement on the Conservation and Optimal Use of Living Aquatic Resources of the Caspian Sea, <i>Article 4-3</i> , 2014	<b>The priority of protecting the living water resources of the Caspian Sea over their commercial use</b>
The Parties will acknowledge the crucial importance of the agreed biological management of the Caspian Sea, as well as the determination of the total allowable catch of all types of migratory aquatic biological resources in the assessment of the biological resources of the Caspian Sea	Joint statement Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Turkmenistan, <i>Article 4</i> , 2010	<b>The fight against illegal, unreported, illegal fishing and illegal trading of living aquatic resources</b>
The Contracting Parties shall endeavor to establish and implement individual or joint programs to monitor the environmental conditions of the Caspian	Law of the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of	<b>The design and compilation of the monitoring database of the features related to the</b>



Sea	the Caspian Sea, Article 19-1, 2012	<b>status of the Caspian Sea</b>
Using the Caspian Sea for peaceful purposes, transforming it into a zone of peace, good neighborliness, friendship and cooperation, and resolving all issues related to the Caspian Sea through peaceful means	Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, Article 3, 2018	<b>The use of the Caspian Sea for peaceful purposes</b>

### The Discourse of Environmental Protection as the Central Signifier of the Caspian Sea Upstream Documents

In the discussion of biological, climatic and legal management, the documents related to the Caspian Sea in the country, from the initial laws dating back to 1299, as well as other documents related to this period that have been compiled in the Caspian Sea basin, show their environmental protection discourse. Many experts believe that the key to achieving sustainability is to identify methods, types, systems and management practices that provide the opportunity to create an appropriate balance between environmental protection and economic sustainability (Stieglitz, 2023). In 1972, the United States Congress passed the Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act (MPRSA), which effectively prohibits the discharge into the sea of “any substance that affects the health, welfare or comfort of humans or the ecological systems of the environment”, or negatively affects economic potential. (Brander & Betjemann, 2023: 85)

The results of the document analysis show that despite the dominance of the environmental discourse on the upstream documents of the Caspian Sea, it seems that a kind of critical discourse prevails, especially at the environmental and geopolitical levels, which despite the policy maker's emphasis on refining, preventing, controlling and reducing Pollution caused by sources located on land and sea, as well as pollution caused by human activities, but a large part of the laws have not been implemented in the field of action and some researchers lack a stable legal regime, the closure of the lake (the physical and physical shape of the lake), the attitude The commodity and materialism of the coastal countries towards the Caspian resources and the underdevelopment and dependence of part of the coastal countries on western technologies are considered as the most important geopolitical factors affecting the pollution of the Caspian (Zarkhani and Ahmadi, 2017: 149).

**Table 3.** Elements of the discourse of environmental protection in the upstream documents of the Caspian Sea

Sample speech	Program type	Type of discourse
Protecting the ecological system and biodiversity of living aquatic resources in the Caspian Sea	Law on the Agreement on the Conservation and Optimal Use of Living Aquatic Resources of the Caspian Sea, Article4-4.2014	Hegemony of the discourse on the protection of the marine environment of the Caspian Sea
Developing scientific, technical, educational and public awareness programs, and training scientific, technical and administrative staff.	Law on the approval of the Protocol for the Protection of the Caspian Sea against Pollution from Land-Based Sources and Activities Article16-A.2015	Discourse hegemony paying attention to education, public awareness research and presenting continuous reports
Harmonization of measures related to the conservation, optimal use of the living aquatic resources of the Caspian Sea and the management of living aquatic resources common throughout the habitat area of the species -	Law on the Agreement on the Conservation and Optimal Use of Living Aquatic Resources of the Caspian Sea, Article 4-6.2014	Discourse hegemony regarding non-pollution, environmental control and monitoring
The Parties concerned shall ensure effective public participation in the environmental impact assessment process of the proposed activity under this Protocol from the early stages of the environmental impact assessment process	Law on the Additional Protocol on Transboundary Environmental Impact Assessment to the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea, Article 4-4.2018	The Discursive Hegemony of Environmental Impact Assessment

### Othring Of the Discourse of Environmental Protection in The Upstream Documents of The Caspian Sea (1921-2022)

Discourse Othring or non-discourse, in the method of discourse analysis, examines the opposite and non-aligned discourse with the dominant discourse. In fact, Othring examines the possibility that if the discourse is to be clearly opposed to the ruling discourse, which discourse is it? And how is science supposed to stand up against

the ruling discourse? And can you show examples of other discourses? In fact, the researcher examines the ruling discourse with a critical eye in the othering of the discourse (Bonyad and Zare Shahabadi, 2023). Therefore, the non-dominant discourse on the upstream documents of the Caspian Sea is the discourse of central responsible environmental participation. This type of discourse tries to protect the environment of the Caspian Sea and preserve its ecological power in order to pass it on to future generations; consider the participation of other stakeholders.

Participatory processes towards sustainability have attracted increasing attention among researchers, policymakers, business practitioners, and other environmental stakeholders. Despite the emergence and acceptance of collaboration in various sectors, including government, industry, and the environmental community, little critical research has contributed to our understanding of how collaboration is effective and appropriate as an alternative to traditional "command and control" (Hartman et al., 2002).

There is a long way to pay attention to the protection of the unique ecosystem of the Caspian Sea. Poloniemi & Koskinen (2005) research results showed that both environmental education and nature conservation policy with participation and partnership deals. If participants find the processes of their participation in environmental protection meaningful and effective for themselves and their communities, these processes are likely to have learning effects at both individual and societal levels.

Although the policymakers in various parts of the laws, programs, policies, plans and instructions related to matters such as the responsibility of the coastal countries of the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, 2007), have put the responsibility of harming the ecosystem of the Caspian Sea on the polluting party, however, it cannot be said The dominant discourse has been the discourse of central participation and the responsibility of all involved in the protection of the Caspian Sea. In the participation-oriented approaches in the upstream documents of the Caspian Sea, a kind of state-oriented approach is evident; in state-oriented approaches, despite the participation of all stakeholders, the basic tasks of environmental protection are the responsibility of the government. In this approach, environmental protection is basically a matter of governance that requires the government's intervention and supervision, in fact, in this approach, it is assumed that the market and the private sector in protecting the environment and dealing with the negative environmental consequences caused by Economic activities are weak and it is the government that is basically responsible for protecting the environment as a public good. (Mashhadi, 2015: 62).

To speak frankly, the analysis of the Caspian Sea's strategic documents indicates that the state-centered discourse dominant among policymakers has hindered genuine participation by local communities, grassroots groups, and real stakeholders in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the data (including policies, programs, and guidelines) clearly demonstrate that the role of non-governmental environmental organizations in policymaking and the implementation of Caspian Sea protection programs has been marginalized. Within this state-centered discourse, such organizations are largely viewed as secondary executors or informal observers rather than as true decision-making partners. In addition, the analysis of these documents revealed that this discourse assumes an inherent incapacity of the private sector to protect the environment. As a result, any form of non-governmental economic participation whether in conservation efforts or marine investment tends to be weakened or overlooked. Although some of the Caspian Sea's strategic documents and statements refer to transnational cooperation among the littoral states for environmental protection, the themes of coastal states' responsibility and genuine multilateral regional cooperation (based on equal participation rather than state control) are not strongly emphasized.

## CONCLUSION

The upstream documents of the Caspian Sea provided an opportunity for its sociological analysis to better recognize that the documents of the Caspian Sea are valuable not only in terms of legal-natural-environmental and protection, but also in social terms. With the help of this research, indicators were presented for the analysis of documents in the form of discourse components, central signifier, equivalence chain and othering. Adopting the environmental discourse approach in these documents showed that environmental protection in the form of cooperation, participation, interaction and dialogue regarding the Caspian Sea ecosystem is very important for the Iranian government.

Contrary to what was observed in the document analysis, participation along with acceptance of responsibility is not included in these documents. It can be said that the political, security, legal and international nature of these documents has provided the possibility of participation only at micro levels such as local communities and residents. Maritime governance is placed within this policy framework to map out the systematic engagement of government, people and civil society to ascertain how this engagement can contribute to better policy design. The

participation of the main inhabitants of the sea can reduce the costs of implementing different levels of policy programs because we involve the stakeholders in the details of the plans and thus apply more transparency.

The review and analysis of the documents over the selected time period revealed that, in the early years of document formulation, the programs, bills, and consortia were generally broad in nature and focused on the joint use of the sea by the regional countries (e.g., the Treaty of Friendship between Iran and Russia, Moscow, 1921; and the Trade and Navigation Agreement between the Imperial Government of Iran and the Soviet Union, 1940). As time progressed, however, policies, documents, and programs increasingly concentrated on issues specifically related to the Caspian Sea (for instance, the Law on the Punishment of Illegal Fishing in the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, 1979). From 2003 onwards marked by the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea (2003) virtually all official documents have been explicitly centered on the Caspian Sea and its various environmental, legal, and economic dimensions. Therefore, the discourse prevailing in the early documents was primarily characterized by a general orientation towards regional cooperation and shared use of marine resources, whereas in later years it gradually evolved into a more specialized, Caspian Sea-focused, and environmentally driven discourse.

#### **Ethic Statement**

In all stages of the research, since the data used was collected from upstream documents, the data was not collected with the participation of humans or animals.

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Declaration of competing interest the authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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