

Ocean treaty: Historic agreement reached after decade of talks

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By Esme Stallard

Climate and Science Reporter, BBC News

Nations have reached a historic agreement to protect the world's oceans following 10 years of negotiations.

The High Seas Treaty aims to place 30% of the seas into protected areas by 2030, to safeguard and recuperate marine nature.

The agreement was reached on Saturday evening, after 38 hours of talks, at UN headquarters in New York.

The negotiations had been held up for years over disagreements on funding and fishing rights.

The last international agreement on ocean protection was signed 40 years ago in 1982 - the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

That agreement established an area called the high seas - international waters where all countries have a right to fish, ship and do research - but only 1.2% of these waters are protected.

Marine life living outside of these protected areas has been at risk from climate change, overfishing and shipping traffic.

- **In detail: The plan to protect the high seas**

In the latest assessment of global marine species, nearly 10% were found to be at risk of extinction, **according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).**

These new protected areas, established in the treaty, will put limits on how much fishing can take place, the routes of shipping lanes and exploration activities like deep sea mining - when minerals are taken from a sea bed 200m or more below the surface.

Environmental groups **have been concerned** that mining processes could disturb animal breeding grounds, create noise pollution and be toxic for marine life.

The International Seabed Authority that oversees licensing told the BBC that moving forward "any future activity in the deep seabed will be subject to strict environmental regulations and oversight to ensure that they are carried out sustainably and responsibly".



Marine protected areas could help endangered species like the whale shark - the largest living fish - recover

Rena Lee, UN Ambassador for Oceans, brought down the gavel after two weeks of negotiations that at times threatened to unravel.

Minna Epps, director of the IUCN Ocean team, said the main issue was over the sharing of marine genetic resources. Marine genetic resources are biological material from plants and animals in the ocean that can have benefits for society, such as pharmaceuticals, industrial processes and food. Richer nations currently have the resources and funding to explore the deep ocean but poorer nations wanted to ensure any benefits they find are shared equally.



Sea sponges have yielded key ingredients for HIV and cancer treatments

Dr Robert Blasiak, ocean researcher at Stockholm University, said the challenge was that no one knows how much ocean resources are worth and therefore how they could be split.

He said: "If you imagine a big, high-definition, widescreen TV, and if only like three or four of the pixels on that giant screen are working, that's our knowledge of the deep ocean. So we've recorded about 230,000 species in the ocean, but it's estimated that there are over two million."

Laura Meller, an oceans campaigner for Greenpeace Nordic, commended countries for "putting aside differences and delivering a treaty that will let us protect the oceans, build our resilience to climate change and safeguard the lives and livelihoods of billions of people"

"This is a historic day for conservation and a sign that in a divided world, protecting nature and people can triumph over geopolitics," she added.

Countries will need to meet again to formally adopt the agreement and then have plenty of work to do before the treaty can be implemented.

Liz Karan, director of Pews Trust ocean governance team, told the BBC: "It will take some time to take effect. Countries have

to ratify it [legally adopt it] for it to enter force. Then there are a lot of institutional bodies like the Science and Technical Committee that have to get set up."

What is the UN High Seas Treaty and why is it needed?

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By Esme Stallard

Climate and Science Reporter, BBC News

After more than a decade of negotiations, the countries of the United Nations have agreed the first ever treaty to protect the world's oceans that lie outside national boundaries.

The UN High Seas Treaty places 30% of the world's oceans into protected areas, puts more money into marine conservation and means new rules for mining at sea.

Environmental groups say it will help reverse biodiversity losses and ensure sustainable development. Here's what you need to know:

What are the high seas?

Two-thirds of the world's oceans are currently considered international waters.

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That means all countries have a right to fish, ship and do research there.

But until now only about 1% of these waters - known as high seas - have been protected.

This leaves the marine life living in the vast majority of the high seas at risk of exploitation from threats including climate change, overfishing and shipping traffic.

Which marine species are at risk?

In the latest assessment of marine species, nearly 10% were found to be at risk of extinction, **according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).**

Dr Ngozi Oguguah, chief research officer at Nigerian Institute For Oceanography and Marine Research said: "The two biggest causes [of extinction] are overfishing and pollution. If we have marine protected sanctuaries most of the marine resources will have the time to recover."

Abalone species - a type of shellfish - sharks and whales have come under particular pressure due to their high value as seafood and for drugs.

- **Animal that inspired mermaid extinct in China**



Dugongs used to be common marine animals but now less than 1000 remain in the wild

The IUCN estimates that 41% of the threatened species are also affected by climate change.

Minna Epps, head of IUCN's ocean team, said: "A bit more than a quarter of emitted carbon dioxide is actually being absorbed by the ocean. That makes the ocean much more acidic, which means that it's going to be less productive and jeopardize certain species and ecosystems."

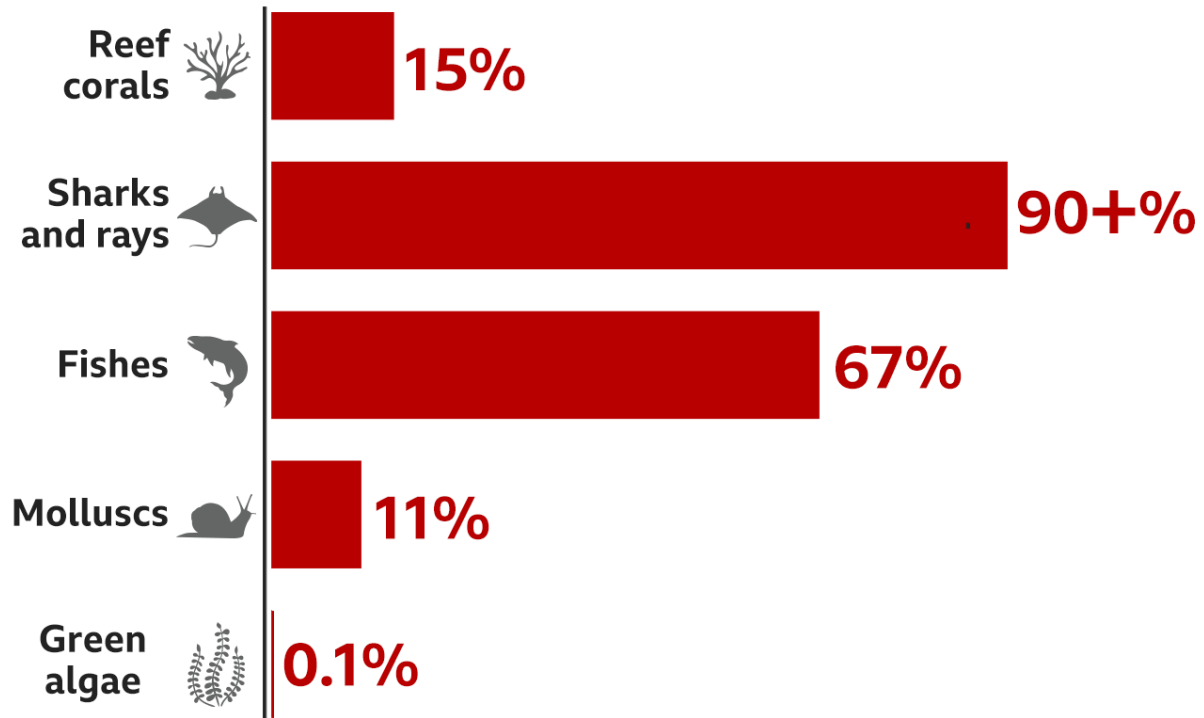
Climate change has also increased marine heat waves 20-fold, **according to research** published in the magazine Science - which can bring about extreme events like cyclones but **also mass mortality events**.

Ms Epps said to tackle the issue of climate change in the sea involves implementing the other global agreements such as the Paris Agreement.

She said: "This is a real reason to have a synergies and collaboration between these different multilateral agreements we've seen increasingly within the UN conventions on climate change."

- **What is the Paris climate agreement?**

Global species assessed for extinction threat



*Assessed species include lobsters, freshwater crabs, freshwater crayfishes and freshwater shrimps

Source: IUCN Red List



The treaty also aims to protect against potential impacts like deep sea mining. This is the process of collecting minerals from the ocean bed.

Environmental groups are seriously concerned about the possible effects of mining, such as disturbing sediments, creating noise pollution and damaging breeding grounds.

- **Renewables' deep-sea mining conundrum**

What is in the High Seas Treaty?

The headline is the agreement to place 30% of the world's international waters into protected areas (MPAs) by 2030.

However, the level of protection in these areas was fiercely contested and remains unresolved.

Dr Simon Walmsley, marine chief advisor of WWF-UK said: "There was debate particularly around what a marine protected area is. Is it sustainable use or fully protected?".

Whatever form of protection is agreed when would this be there will be restrictions on how much fishing can take place, the routes of shipping lanes and exploration activities like deep sea mining.

Other key measures include:

- Arrangements for sharing marine genetic resources, such as biological material from plants and animals in the ocean. These can have benefits for society, such as pharmaceuticals and food
- Requirements for environmental assessments for deep sea activities like mining



Marine Protected Areas will have restrictions or complete bans on fishing to limit marine species loss

Richer nations have also pledged new money for the delivery of the treaty.

The EU announced nearly 820m euros (£722.3m) for international ocean protection on Thursday.

However, developing nations were disappointed that a specific funding amount was included in the text.

Will this make a difference?

Despite the breakthrough in agreeing the treaty there is still a long way to go before it is legally agreed.

The treaty must first be formally adopted at a later session, and then it only enters "into force" once enough countries have signed up and legally passed it in their own countries.

Dr Simon Walmsley said: "There is a real delicate balance, if you don't have enough states it won't enter into force. But also need to get the states with enough money to get the impact. We are thinking around 40 states to get the whole thing into force".

Russia was one of the countries who registered concerns over the final text.

Countries have to then start looking at practically how these measures would be implemented and managed.

Ms Epps, from the IUCN said this implementation is crucial. If marine protected areas are not properly connected, it might not have the desired impact as many species are migratory and may travel across unprotected areas where they are at risk.

Biodiversity: 'Magical marine species' pushed toward extinction

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The dugong is said to have inspired ancient legends of mermaids

By Helen Briggs

Environment correspondent

A "sea cow" that evoked tales of mermaids is being driven to the edge of extinction, conservation experts warn.

According to an update of the official extinction list, the dugong is almost wiped out in some parts of the world.

Scientists have also sounded alarm over the loss of other marine creatures, including exotic coral and shellfish.

They said humans had created a "perfect storm" that threatens marine life across the globe.

The International Union for Conservation for Nature (IUCN), which compiles the official Red List of endangered species, revealed the latest findings at the UN biodiversity conference, COP 15.

- **Reverse nature's decline or there is no future - UN**
- **COP15: Call for biodiversity 'peace pact with nature'**
- **What is biodiversity and how can we protect it?**

"We simply cannot afford to fail," said Dr Bruno Oberle, head of the IUCN.

He warned of the urgent need to address the linked climate and biodiversity crises, or "risk losing the crucial benefits the oceans provide us with".

The latest update to the list, which has now assessed more than 150,000 species, revealed "a perfect storm of unsustainable human activity decimating marine life around the globe," he said.



The pillar coral is one of 26 corals in the Atlantic Ocean listed as critically endangered

Countries are meeting in Montreal, Canada, to try to agree targets for addressing the loss of nature amid an extinction crisis threatening a million species on Earth. High on their agenda is a plan to protect 30% of land and sea for nature across the globe by 2030.

Environmental groups say progress in the first week has been slow and are calling for a step change in both pace and ambition.

"We will continue to see threats to marine life and our whole natural world unless we secure an ambitious deal," said Bernadette Fischler Hooper of WWF.

The latest extinction list highlights risks to a type of pillar coral that forms finger-like structures found throughout the

Caribbean. It is now classed as critically endangered. The coral is dying due to disease, climate change and pollution.

Meanwhile, many species of abalone, the world's most expensive seafood, are threatened with extinction, due to poaching and unsustainable harvesting, made worse by disease, pollution and climate change.

Marine biologist, Prof Amanda Vincent, of the University of British Columbia, Canada, said the "awful status" of these species should shock us and engage us for urgent action.

"These magical marine species are treasured wildlife, from the wonderful abalone to the charismatic dugong and the glorious pillar coral, and we should safeguard them accordingly," she added.



Twenty of the world's 54 abalone species are threatened with extinction

Dugongs belong to the Sirenia, an order of aquatic mammals sometimes known as "sea cows". The Sirenia family also includes manatees.

In 2015, the IUCN classified dugongs as vulnerable to extinction worldwide due to a myriad of threats, including being caught up in fishing gear or struck by boat propellers, ocean pollution and the loss of the sea grasses on which they graze.

- **Animal that inspired mermaid extinct in China**

They are now particularly concerned about two populations. One, living in waters off Mozambique, is down to just 250 individuals and is regarded as critically endangered. The other, in New Caledonia, east of Australia, is deemed endangered.



The dugong grazes on sea grasses in shallow coastal waters

There are still dugongs living in the waters off around 40 countries. Australia has the world's largest population of dugongs today, largely thanks to having a sparsely populated coast with lots of sea grasses.

Earlier this year the dugong was declared functionally extinct in China. "Functional extinction" means that even if some dugongs are still alive off China's coast, their numbers are too small to maintain a viable population.

High seas treaty: historic deal to protect international waters finally reached at UN

After almost 20 years of talks, United Nations member states agree on legal framework for parts of the ocean outside national boundaries

[‘The most important talks no one has heard of’: why the high seas treaty matters](#)

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It has been almost two decades in the making, but late on Saturday night in New York, after days of gruelling round-the-clock talks, UN member states finally agreed on a treaty to protect the high seas.

A full day after the deadline for talks had officially passed, the conference president, Rena Lee of Singapore, took to the floor of room 2 of the UN headquarters in New York and announced that the treaty had been agreed. At a later date, the delegates will meet for half a day to formally adopt the text. She made it clear the text would not be reopened.



‘The most important talks no one has heard of: why the high seas treaty matters

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“In Singapore, we like to go on learning journeys, and this has been the learning journey of a lifetime,” Lee said.

She thanked delegates for their dedication and commitment. “The success is also yours,” she told them.

She received cheers and a standing ovation from delegates in the room who had not left the conference hall for two days and worked through the night in order to get the deal done.



The Intergovernmental Conference on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction congratulating its President, Ambassador Rena Lee, on the successful conclusion of the BBNJ treaty. Photograph: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore

The historic treaty is crucial for enforcing the 30x30 pledge made by countries at the **UN biodiversity conference in December**, to protect a third of the sea (and land) by 2030. Without a treaty, this target would certainly fail, as until now no legal mechanism existed to set up MPAs on the high seas.

Covering almost two-thirds of the ocean that lies outside national boundaries, the treaty will provide a legal framework for establishing vast marine protected areas (MPAs) to protect against the loss of wildlife and share out the genetic resources of the high seas. It will establish a conference of the parties (Cop) that will meet periodically and enable member states to be held to account on issues such as governance and biodiversity.



Ambassador Rena Lee thanked delegates for their dedication and commitment. Photograph: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore

Ocean ecosystems produce half the oxygen we breathe, represent 95% of the planet's biosphere and soak up carbon dioxide, as the world's largest carbon sink. Yet until now, fragmented and loosely enforced rules governing the high seas have rendered this area more susceptible than coastal waters to exploitation.

Veronica Frank, political adviser for Greenpeace, said that while the organisation hadn't seen the latest text, "We are really happy. The world is so divided and to see multilateralism supported is so important.

"What's really important is now to use this tool to develop this 30x30 target into force really quickly."

The Pew Charitable Trust welcomed the "landmark international agreement".



Activists from Greenpeace display a banner before the United Nations headquarters during ongoing negotiations at the UN on a treaty to protect the high seas in New York Photograph: Ed Jones/AFP/Getty Images

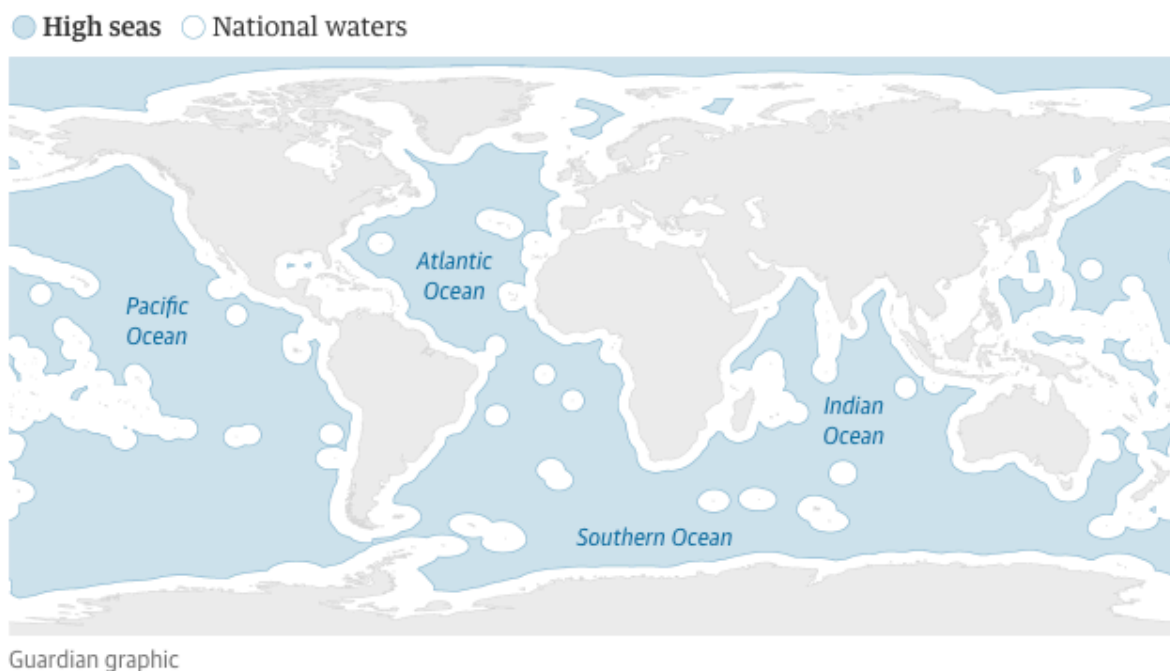
“High seas marine protected areas can play a critical role in the impacts of climate change,” said Liz Karan, director of Pew’s ocean governance project. “Governments and civil society must now ensure the agreement is adopted and rapidly enters into force and is effectively implemented to safeguard high seas biodiversity.”

The High Ambition Coalition – which includes the EU, US, UK and China – were key players in brokering the deal, building coalitions instead of sowing division and showing willingness to compromise in the final days of talks. The Global South led the way in ensuring the treaty could be put into practice in a fair and equitable way.

The European commissioner for the environment, ocean and fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius, described the agreement as a “historic moment for the ocean” and the culmination of more than a decade of work and international negotiations.

“With the agreement on the UN High Seas Treaty, we take a crucial step forward to preserve the marine life and biodiversity that are essential for us and the generations to come,” she said. “It is also a proof of strengthened multilateral

cooperation with our partners and a major asset to implement our COP 15 goal for 30% ocean protection. I am very proud of our outcome.”



Michael Imran Kanu, the head of the African Group and ambassador and deputy permanent representative to the UN for legal affairs of Sierra Leone, said the treaty was “robust and ambitious”. **Kanu, who expressed concerns during talks** over the fair and equitable sharing of benefits, said: “We really achieved amazing results” on this issue. Monetary and non-monetary benefits would be shared and an initial upfront fund would be set up under the treaty. He welcomed the adoption of the “common heritage of humankind” as a key principle for the high seas, which was a red line for many developing states. “That was significant for us”, he said.



Watered down: why negotiators at Cop15 are barely mentioning the ocean

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It is the third time in less than a year that member states have hunkered down in the UN's headquarters in New York to thrash out a "final" deal. The negotiations, which ran over two weeks from 20 February were the fifth round of talks after earlier negotiations ended last August without agreement.

That an agreement was reached between 193 nations at all, was a huge achievement, but conservationists say it leaves significant scope for improvement. In particular, countries agreed that existing bodies already responsible for regulating activities such as fisheries, shipping and deep-sea mining could continue to do so without having to carry out environmental impact assessments laid out by the treaty.

One of the key stumbling blocks, **which divided developing and developed nations**, was how to fairly share marine genetic resources (MGR) and the eventual profits. MGR, which consist of the genetic material of deep-sea marine sponges, krill, corals, seaweeds and bacteria, are attracting increasing scientific and commercial attention due to their potential use in medicines and cosmetics.

Others sticking points included the procedure for creating marine protected areas and the model for environmental impact studies of planned activities on the high seas.

In a move seen as an attempt to build trust between rich and poor countries, the European Union pledged €40m (\$42m) in New York to facilitate the ratification of the treaty and its early implementation.

Monica Medina, the US assistant secretary for oceans, international environment and scientific affairs, who attended the negotiations in New York, said: “We leave here with the ability to create protected areas in the high seas and achieve the ambitious goal of conserving 30% of the ocean by 2030. And the time to start is now.”

She said the US was pleased to agree on the major element of a high seas treaty that includes a strong, coordinated approach to establishing marine protected areas.

Rebecca Hubbard, director of the High Seas Alliance, said: “Following a two-week-long rollercoaster of a ride of negotiations and superhero efforts in the last 48 hours, governments reached agreement on key issues that will advance protection and better management of marine biodiversity in the high seas.”

“What happens on the high seas will no longer be ‘out of sight, out of mind,” said Jessica Battle of WWF in a statement after leading the group’s team at the negotiations. “We can now look at the cumulative impacts on our ocean in a way that reflects the interconnected blue economy and the ecosystems that support it.”