

Protect High Seas Biodiversity

The high seas—marine areas beyond national jurisdiction (1)—cover nearly half of Earth’s surface (2). The high seas support our planet in countless ways, from regulating the climate, to feeding millions of people, to supporting industries that contribute billions of dollars to the global economy (3). Even so, less than 1% of the high seas are fully protected (4), and the current patchwork of management and lack of oversight leaves them vulnerable to abuse. In 2017, the United Nations resolved to develop an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of the high seas. Negotiations are set to end in 2021. We must ensure that the forthcoming framework conserves high-seas biodiversity and promotes sustainable and equitable use.

To maximize biodiversity protection beyond national jurisdiction, the high seas treaty should incorporate the timely establishment of a network of fully protected marine protected areas for diverse habitats in strategic locations. Fully protected marine reserves in the open ocean preserve fish populations, protect fragile and valuable ecosystems, and increase ecosystem resilience (5, 6). Implementing effective marine protected areas will require a coordinated approach across existing regional and sectoral bodies and the scientific community (6, 7).

The treaty should also provide a robust framework to assess the environmental impacts of activities on the high seas. Such evaluations should use comprehensive and rigorous global standards and transparent monitoring. Where necessary, existing assessment processes should be reimagined to better measure cumulative impacts. Because the high seas are dynamic and poorly understood, strategic environmental assessments will be required to design effective policies in the future (7).

Finally, the treaty should establish a robust institutional framework that will enable the successful implementation of these safeguards. At a minimum, the changes will require an administrative body, a decision-making body, a scientific committee with influence over decision-making, and a compliance committee. All activities, decisions, and plans should be open and transparent.

Every year, vulnerable and under-studied marine ecosystems are substantially, and in some cases permanently, altered by human activities (8, 9). The proposed treaty provides an opportunity to conserve the high seas for generations to come and create a more equitable ocean for all humankind (10, 11). We call on all nations to construct an ambitious treaty and conclude these negotiations as soon as possible, to finally put legal protection in place for the unprotected half of our planet (12).

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