

Conservation Connections Newsletter

Global Ocean Legislation

Jan 2026



The ocean covers 70% of our planet, yet it is often governed by a patchwork of disconnected national rules. While coastal nations manage their own waters, nearly 50% of the Earth's surface falls under the "High Seas"—international waters that belong to no one and everyone.

The "High Seas" Gap: A Legislative Black Hole

Nations generally control the waters up to 200 nautical miles from their shores. Beyond that lies the "High Seas."

They belong to everyone, which paradoxically means they belong to no one. In this legislative vacuum:

- **Overfishing** thrives in a fragmented system, as boats exploit gaps between regional authorities to bypass quotas.
- **Deep-sea mining** exploration has proceeded with minimal oversight.
- **Biodiversity hotspots**, areas filled with life found nowhere else on Earth, have remained entirely unprotected.

This creates the "Tragedy of the Commons": without a comprehensive global sheriff, incentives to conserve are often fragmented, creating loopholes for exploitation.

Why is global legislation crucial?

The global community has recognized that a patchwork of national laws cannot protect a borderless ecosystem. This realization has opened a path for the High Seas Treaty (formally the BBNJ Agreement).

This legislation is a game changer. For the first time in history, it provides a legal mechanism to establish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in international waters.

5 main takeaways from the High Seas Treaty:

1 Strengthening 30 X 30

This agreement seeks to protect 30% of the Ocean by 2030. This was an outcome from COP 15 (the global biodiversity conference held in Dec, 2022) that will be strengthened with the help of this treaty.

3 Conference of the Parties (COP)

Establish a COP to ensure accountability on issues like biodiversity and governance.

5 Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA's)

Greater obligations to conduct EIA's on activities relating to pollution or any potential effects on the marine environment that is unknown or not yet fully understood.

2 Marine Protected Areas

This treaty will provide the legal framework necessary to set up MPA's, as no such framework currently exists.

4 Marine Genetic Resources (MGR'S)

Highlighting the need for processes to share genetic resources like plants and animals for pharmaceuticals, food, cosmetics, etc.



But what is our part in all this?

Here is how you can support international ocean governance from your desk or home:

● **Support the "Blue Economy":** Support brands that have clear transparency regarding their supply chains. Avoid products containing shark squalene (often in cosmetics) or unverified deep-sea minerals. By demanding transparency, we make it harder for industries to hide behind the anonymity of the High Seas.

● **Vote with Your Menu** (Sustainable Seafood): The biggest driver of activity on the High Seas is industrial fishing. Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing thrives when consumers don't ask questions.
→ seafoodwatch.org

● **Stay Vocal:** Treaties only work if countries ratify and enforce them. For a country to be bound by a UN treaty, they must both sign and ratify it (81 countries as of December 2025).
→ [High Seas Treaty Map](#)

Governments prioritize what their citizens talk about. Your message can inspire leaders to act now to protect life in our shared ocean.
→ [High Seas Treaty message](#)

For more information:

[High Seas Alliance](#)

[10 Things to Know About the High Seas Treaty](#)