

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

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions below.

1. Which oceans have you swum in? Did you observe any marine animals in their natural habitat?
2. Who legally owns the world's oceans and seas?
3. Why are the oceans crucial for life on our planet?
4. What are the biggest threats to marine life?
5. What steps should be taken globally to protect marine life?

2 Key words

a. Find a word in the article to match each definition. The paragraph number has been given to help you. Then use the word in the example sentence. You may need to change the form of the word.

1. _____ are large boats or ships. (paragraph 2)
More than 14,000 cargo vessel transited through the canal last year.
2. A _____ is a situation or an activity that could cause harm or danger. (paragraph 2)
The largest threat to big cat populations is habitat loss.
3. _____ is the practice of exploring nature to find commercially useful products. (paragraph 2)
Some people argue that indigenous populations can benefit from bioprospecting, while others think it is just another name for biopiracy.
4. The _____ is the parts of the Earth's surface and atmosphere where plant and animal life can exist. (paragraph 3)
Conserving the biosphere is essential for natural life.
5. A _____ is an ocean, forest, or other area of vegetation (plants and trees) that helps to protect the environment by taking in large amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. (paragraph 3)
India has adjusted its carbon sink target by adding 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of CO2 through reforestation and other means.

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6. _____ are the areas where two armies face each other and fight during a war. (paragraph 5)

frontlines

medics battle to save lives in makeshift hospitals.

7. _____ is arguing with someone about something that is not important. (paragraph 5)

They're always **squabbling**

about something inconsequential like which pizza toppings to order.

8. _____ are large quantities of something that is stored to be used in the future. (paragraph 8)

*The platform, which at one point was described as "a **reservoir** for connection and creativity", is now a place of contempt.*

9. A _____ is a temporary union of different groups who agree to work together to achieve a shared aim. (paragraph 11)

A coalition *of over fifty organizations have come together to protest against the new law.*

10. _____ is dealing with a difficult situation. (paragraph 12)

*We need to **confront** the health crisis with more educational campaigns and local support to affected communities.*

11. _____ are systems, processes, departments, etc. that operate in isolation from others. (paragraph 14)

Data silo *are when different departments of an organisation have their own versions of the same data.*

12. _____ is arguing or complaining about something that is not important. (paragraph 15)

*Stop **quibble** and help us tidy up!*

13. To _____ is to arrange the details of a deal, plan, etc. so that everyone can agree to it. (paragraph 15)

*To everyone's surprise, the ambassador helped to **broker** a diplomatic deal between the two countries.*

14. If something is _____, it is covered with a hard layer of something. (paragraph 17)

encrusted
*The jewel- **encrusted** crown was unearthed in the Netherlands.*

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The pressure is building around critical negotiations that could, if successful, shield swathes of the world's ocean

Karen McVeigh

28 February, 2023

- 1 Almost two-thirds of the world's ocean lies outside national boundaries. These are the "high seas", where fragmented and loosely enforced rules have meant a vast portion of the planet, hundreds of miles from land, is often essentially lawless.
- 2 Because of this, the high seas are more susceptible than coastal seas to exploitation. Currently, all countries can navigate, fish (or overfish) and carry out scientific research on the high seas practically at will. Only 1.2% of it is protected, and the increasing reach of fishing and shipping vessels, the threat of deep-sea mining, and "bioprospecting" of marine species, mean they are being threatened like never before.
- 3 Yet, not only does a healthy ocean provide half of the oxygen we breathe, it represents 95% of the planet's biosphere, soaks up carbon dioxide and is Earth's largest carbon sink.
- 4 Delegates from 193 member states began talks at the UN headquarters in New York to conclude negotiations for what scientists have described as a "once in a lifetime" chance to at last protect the high seas.
- 5 The pressure is on. The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, weighed in with strong words, saying the ocean was on the "frontlines" of the war against nature and calling on nations to stop squabbling and conclude the delayed negotiations.
- 6 Above all, the talks are critical to enforcing the 30x30 pledge from the UN Biodiversity Conference in December, 2022: a promise to protect 30% of the ocean (as well as 30% of the land) by 2030. Without a high seas treaty, scientists and environmentalists agree the 30x30 pledge will fail since no legal mechanism exists for establishing protected marine areas on the high seas.

- 7 "Every second breath being taken comes from the ocean generating oxygen," said Liz Karan, who leads high seas protection work at the Pew Charitable Trusts. "A healthy ocean is critical for having life on the planet – including human life."
- 8 Karan and others are hopeful that countries will finalize a legal framework to establish a network of high sea marine protected areas (MPAs) to create "reservoirs for adaptation and resilience" for species in a changing climate.
- 9 The hold-ups in the treaty talks are practical and ideological, but the conference president, Rena Lee, sounded hopeful: "We're closer to the finish line than ever before. But there are sticking points: the practical matter of how to establish and maintain MPAs in areas that aren't governed by any individual country, and the ethical matter of how to secure fair access to marine resources for all."
- 10 "There is tension between countries that have those resources and countries that don't," said Karan. "There are some countries – like big, distant-water fishing countries [nations that send fleets of fishing vessels across the globe] – that are protecting their interests."
- 11 Even within the 51 countries – including the UK, the US and the EU – that signed up to a "high-ambition coalition", there are issues yet to be resolved. "One of them", Karan said, "is how this new treaty body will interact with existing organizations: in particular, the fisheries organizations."
- 12 "What the science shows", Karan added, "is that we need to put conservation first if we are going to protect fisheries resources for future generations." That means immediately confronting overfishing and illegal fishing, which together are the biggest driver of environmental decline in the ocean.
- 13 "Heavily subsidized, industrial fishers seek to exploit and profit from ocean resources that, by law, belong to everyone," said Jessica Battle, a senior global oceans expert for WWF who is leading the NGO's team at the negotiations.
- 14 "It's a tragedy of the commons." For Battle, a legally binding high seas treaty would be crucial to breaking down the existing silos between current management bodies, resulting in less cumulative impact and better cooperation.

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15 Greenpeace warned the treaty was in jeopardy as countries in the global north, including China, refused to compromise. The latest draft of the treaty still contained major areas of disagreement, it said. Laura Meller, an oceans campaigner at Greenpeace Nordic, said: "The global north must seek compromises instead of quibbling over minor points. China must urgently reimagine its role at these negotiations ... China has an opportunity to transform global ocean governance and broker, instead of break, a landmark deal on this new Ocean Treaty."

16 Among the high seas biodiversity hotspots that would benefit from being sanctuaries is the Costa Rica Dome – nutrient-rich waters that attract yellowfin tuna, migratory dolphins, endangered blue whales and leatherback sea turtles. There is also the Emperor Seamount chain, a biodiverse series of seamounts that arches north-west of the Hawaiian islands towards Russia.

17 "There are corridors of the sea where whales aggregate every year. Big undersea mountains, encrusted in corals," said Doug McCauley, an associate professor of ocean science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who contributed to a paper highlighting 10 such proposed sanctuaries.

"There's a real opportunity to make history with this treaty," he said. "It is arguably one of the most important international negotiations that no one has ever heard of."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Complete the statements using information from the article.

1. The high seas are practically lawless because the area lacks _____.
2. The ocean is the planet's largest carbon sink and provides the oxygen for every _____ we take.
3. The 30x30 pledge promises to protect 30% of _____ by 2030.
4. The aim of MPAs is to create safe spaces to help species survive in _____.
5. It is difficult for countries to agree about how MPAs should be established in places not governed by _____.
6. Karan thinks that conservation should be a priority to ensure _____ resources.
7. _____ and _____ combined are the biggest cause of environmental decline in the ocean.
8. Greenpeace urges countries in the _____ to compromise.
9. The Costa Rica dome is one of _____ proposed sanctuaries for marine life.
10. _____ thinks that the High Seas Treaty could be something that will be remembered by generations to come.

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4 Key language

a. Complete the phrases from the text. Their definitions have been provided.

1. _____ will: at any time that you want or choose
2. _____ a lifetime: used to describe an experience that is very unusual or special
3. the pressure _____: you are expected to achieve good results
4. _____ finish line: closer to achieving or completing something
5. _____ point: something that people cannot agree on and that stops them from continuing with a discussion
6. tragedy _____: when individuals with access to a shared resource act in their own interest and by doing so deplete the resource
7. _____ history: do something that many people will remember or learn about because it is very important

b. Now write sentences of your own using the phrases from the previous task.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Fishing in the high seas should be illegal. That way, countries and companies with the resources to exploit these faraway areas won’t be able to.”
- “Bioprospecting should be allowed everywhere, since it might lead to the discovery of species or substances that can be turned into products that can benefit everyone.”
- “The UN’s 30x30 pledge is a good start, but it’s not nearly enough. More effort needs to be made to protect the natural world.”

6 In your own words

- a. Research the life, habits, and habitat of an endangered marine animal. Find out where they fit in the food chain.
- b. Write a letter to humans from the animal’s perspective, urging them to protect the oceans and your species.