



Global Issues <http://www.globalissues.org>  
Social, Political, Economic and Environmental Issues That Affect Us All

---

## A Promising Start for a High Seas Treaty

---

by Elizabeth Wilson (united nations) | Saturday, April 09, 2016 Inter Press Service

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 09 (IPS) - Delegates from 83 countries came together at the United Nations from March 28 to April 8 for the first in a series of landmark meetings on ocean protection. This Preparatory Committee will help forge an agreement to determine how nations move forward to protect the high seas—the 64 percent of the ocean that belongs to everyone but is governed by no one.

The high seas—which begin beyond each country's exclusive economic zone, 200 miles from shore—were once thought to be devoid of life. But science has now shown that they're full of diverse species, from highly migratory sharks and turtles to the smallest microscopic organisms that help build the base of ocean food webs.

As yet, no cohesive management structure exists: While regional fisheries management organizations can set rules for fishing, the International Maritime Organization can do the same for shipping, and the International Seabed Authority controls mining, there's no way for them to all work together.

And that's why this U.N. meeting was so important.

\* { While there are four core parts of the proposed agreement, two provisions are particularly important: the creation of marine protected areas and reserves on the high seas, and the development of environmental impact assessments for high seas activities.

High seas marine protected areas are increasingly important. Science has demonstrated that these types of protections—and in particular, large-scale, fully protected reserves—are critical for protecting biodiversity, rebuilding fish stocks, and building resilience to climate change. But to date only 2 percent of the ocean is fully protected—the majority within exclusive economic zones.

{ The U.N. has adopted a Sustainable Development Goal for the ocean that calls on countries to protect 10 percent of the ocean by 2020. But even that might not be enough. New science suggests that 30 percent of the world's ocean needs to be set aside. Such a level of protection would be nearly impossible in practice without including the high seas.

The good news is that during the Preparatory Committee meeting, many representatives spoke in favor of a new global regime to implement high seas marine protected areas—evidence that the momentum for such action is growing.

Delegates also floated fresh ideas for effective environmental impact assessments. For example, while we have scientific studies on many of the factors affecting the marine environment, new and emerging activities on the high seas could affect biodiversity in the future. The world community must find a way to evaluate the impact of any activities before they're allowed to occur.

It's encouraging that this meeting fostered robust discussions, active participation, and a high level of interest from governments and from intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations. All regions of the world—including small islands and landlocked states—had a seat at the table.

This is just the beginning of the conversation. At the end of August, the same group will come together for the second of

its four meetings. By the end of next year, the preparatory meetings will be over—and moving forward with an agreement will be in the U.N. General Assembly's court to consider. If the momentum that has brought us this far continues, the assembly could fully adopt a treaty by 2020.

The meetings that concluded April 8 offer real hope that strong language will be developed on marine protected areas, including marine reserves, and environmental impact assessments. The high seas, and the biodiversity within them, require no less.

(End)

© *Inter Press Service (2016) — All Rights Reserved* Original source: *Inter Press Service*

“When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” — *Dom Hélder Câmara*

© Copyright 1998–2016