

Better world: End the pillaging of the high seas

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To have any chance of saving the oceans' richness as climate change kicks in, we have to put a stop to the free-for-all out on the open oceans.



LESS than 1 per cent of the ocean is protected to any meaningful degree. That needs to change, and fast.

The oceans provide us with [many vital services](#): a significant proportion of [the food we eat](#); underpinning for the tourism industry that is many countries' lifeblood; [soaking up half of the carbon dioxide we pump out](#), and much more. But pollution and overfishing are taking their toll. In places, entire habitats are being destroyed, from fishermen dynamiting reefs to trawlers trashing slow growing deepwater corals. Fishing fleets roam increasingly far afield and work in ever deeper waters. Mining the deep-sea floor for minerals and other destructive forms of exploitation are on the horizon. And looming above it all is the threat posed by climate change and [ocean acidification](#).

But there is plenty we can do, and one of the most important is to establish more marine reserves. With a few exceptions - mainly situations where central governments imposed closed areas from on high without local support - research has shown that [marine reserves do make a big difference](#). There is a dramatic rise in the amount and diversity of life within no-take zones, which then spills over into neighbouring areas, benefitting fishermen too. Healthy ecosystems have a much better chance of surviving climate change.

There is a growing awareness of the need for protecting large areas. For instance, in 2004, Australia set aside about a third of the Great Barrier Reef. Already, infestations of coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish have [fallen dramatically](#) on protected reefs as the natural balance is restored. And shortly before leaving office, US president George W. Bush [signed orders](#) protecting 500,000 square kilometres in the central Pacific - increasing the total area of

protected ocean by a third.

Welcome as such measures are, they are not nearly enough. As yet none of the high seas, the vast swathes of ocean that fall outside any country's jurisdiction, have any protection. There have been massive declines in populations of large, wide-ranging animals such as sharks and yellowfin tuna, and protecting them will require vast areas to be set aside.

Many researchers think we need to flip the status of the oceans round, from being mostly unprotected to mostly protected, with around a third closed completely to exploitation. "If you think about what you want protected areas to achieve - extinction prevention, rebuilding ecosystem services, rebuilding of fish populations to promote greater fisheries production and so on - when you start asking how much of the sea do you need to do this, the answer is of the order of tens of per cent," says [Callum Roberts](#), a marine reserves expert at the University of York in the UK. "We need to do it pretty quickly too."

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