

‘Time has run out’: UN fails to reach agreement to protect marine life

This fifth round of discussions was meant to establish a UN Ocean Treaty that would protect biodiversity in international waters



United Nations talks to establish an ocean treaty have ended without agreement. Photograph: Daniel Slim/AFP/Getty Images

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Edward Helmore *in New York and agencies*

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The latest round of talks at the **United Nations** aimed at securing protections for marine life in international waters that cover half the planet ended without agreement Saturday.

The fifth round of discussions, which began two weeks ago, were designed to establish a **UN Ocean Treaty** that would set rules for protecting biodiversity in two-thirds of the world's oceanic areas that lie outside territorial waters.



Time running out to protect world's oceans, conservationists say as UN treaty talks stall

But UN members failed to agree on how to share benefits from marine life, establish protected areas, or to prevent human activity with life on the high seas.

“Although we did make excellent progress, we still do need a little bit more time to progress towards the finish line,” UN oceans ambassador Rena Lee said, according to Agence France-Presse.

Many hoped that the New York session, which began on 15 August, would ultimately produce an agreed treaty text on “the conservation and sustainable use of **marine biodiversity** beyond national jurisdiction”.

But environmental campaigners, who noted that discussions had been continuing on and off for 15 years, expressed disappointment and blamed wealthy countries, including the US, of being too slow to compromise.

Among the issues holding up the treaty is agreement on a process for creating **protected areas** as well as environmental impact assessments.

“While progress has been made, particularly on ocean sanctuaries, members of the **High Ambition Coalition** and countries like the USA have moved too slowly to find compromises, despite their commitments,” said Laura Meller of Greenpeace’s Protect the Oceans campaign.

Meller said that some groups, like the Pacific islands and the Caribbean group, had pushed to complete the agreement. But countries in the global north had only started working to reach compromises in the final days of negotiations, she said.

“Time has run out,” Meller added. “Further delay means ocean destruction. We are sad and disappointed. While countries continue to talk, the oceans and all those who rely on them will suffer.”



A Greenpeace activist takes photos of projections on the Brooklyn Bridge of a shark trapped in a net as part of a plea to protect the ocean’s marine life. Photograph: Alexi Rosenfeld/Getty Images

Greenpeace had warned Thursday that treaty talks were on the brink of failure because of the greed of countries in the High Ambition Coalition and others such as the US and Canada. At issue, the group said, was prioritizing hypothetical future profits from **Marine Genetics Resources** over protecting the oceans.

Meller also said that Russia had blocked negotiations, refusing to engage in the treaty process and in attempts at compromise with the European Union “on a wide range of issues”.

Monica Medina, the assistant US secretary of state, said her country remained committed to the goal of protecting at least 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030. “We cannot let the tides and currents push us back,” Medina said. “We must keep going.”

Unless the UN general assembly schedules a special emergency session to conclude negotiations, talks will not automatically resume until next year.

If the body fails to do so, Greenpeace warned that “it will be challenging to protect 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030 – the 30x30 target that scientists say is the **minimum needed** to give the oceans space to recover”.

The failure to reach an agreement comes after world leaders at the **UN Ocean Conference** in Lisbon in July vowed to do everything in their power to save the seas. But despite uplifting calls to action in the closing statement, no clear commitments emerged.

“While it’s disappointing that the treaty wasn’t finalized during the past two weeks of negotiations, we remain encouraged by the progress that was made,” said Liz Karan of the NGO Pew Charitable Trusts of the latest round of talks.

Agence France-Presse and the Associated Press contributed reporting.

Efforts to pass global ocean protection treaty fail

By Esme Stallard

BBC News Climate and Science

- Published
4 hours ago



STEVE DE NEEF/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/ GETTY IMAGES

A fifth effort to pass a global agreement to protect the world's oceans and marine life has failed.

Talks to pass the UN High Seas Treaty had been ongoing for two weeks in New York, but governments could not agree on the terms.

Despite international waters representing nearly two-thirds of the world's oceans, only 1.2% is protected.

Environmental campaigners have called it a "missed opportunity".

The last international agreement on ocean protection was signed 40 years ago in 1982 - the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

That agreement established an area called the high seas - international waters where all countries have a right to fish, ship and do research.

Marine life living outside of the 1.2% of protected areas are at risk of exploitation from the increasing threats of climate change, overfishing and shipping traffic.



Marine animals such as sharks are heavily fished for their meat and claimed medicinal properties

Over the last two weeks 168 members of the original treaty, including the EU, came together to try and make a new agreement.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that documents the status of the world's biodiversity spoke to BBC News during the conference.

Their Senior High Seas Advisor, Kristina Gjerde, explained why this treaty was so important: "The high seas are the vital blue heart of the planet.

"What happens on the high seas affects our coastal communities, affects our fisheries, affects our biodiversity - things we all care so much about."

The negotiations focused on four key areas:

- Establishing marine protected areas
- Improving environmental impact assessments
- Providing finance and capacity building to developing countries
- Sharing of marine genetic resources - biological material from plants and animals in the ocean that can have

benefits for society, such as pharmaceuticals, industrial processes and food

More than 70 countries - including the UK - prior to the meeting had already agreed to put 30% of the world's oceans into protected areas.

This would put limits on how much fishing can take place, the routes of shipping lanes and exploration activities like deep sea mining.

Deep-sea mining is when minerals are taken from the sea bed that is 200m or more below the surface. These minerals include cobalt which is used for electronics, but the process could also be toxic for marine life, according to the IUCN.

As of March 2022, the International Seabed Authority, which regulates these activities, **had issued 31 contracts** to explore the deep sea for minerals.

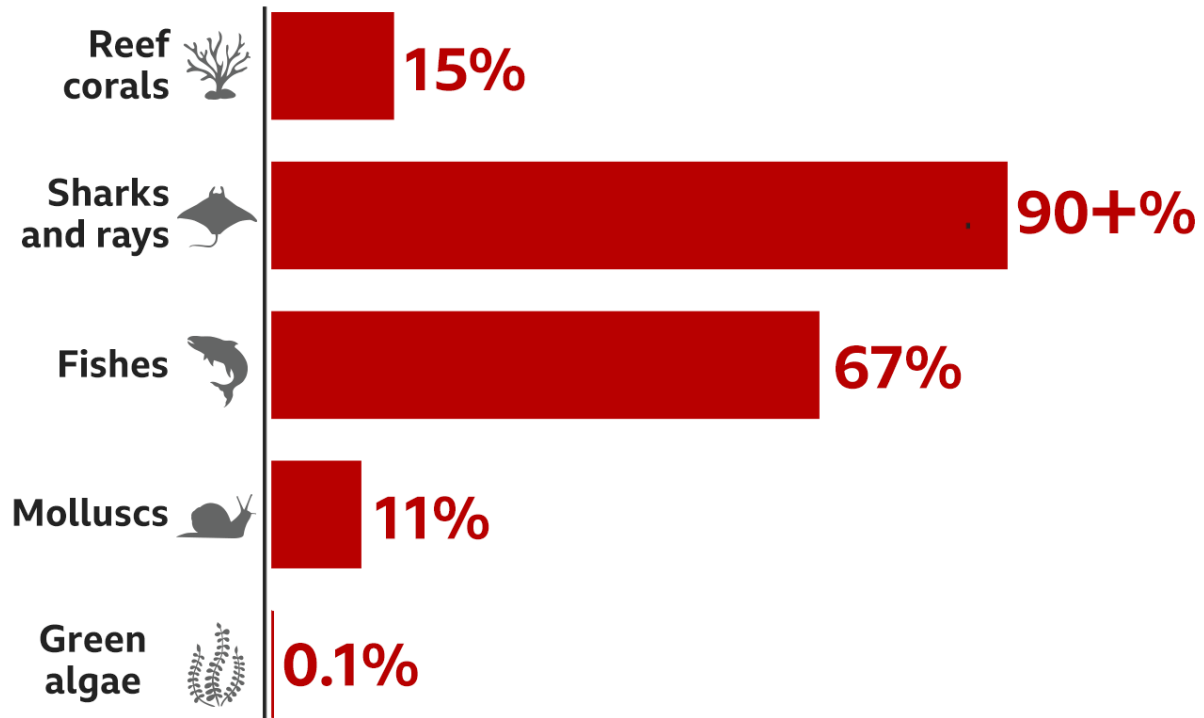
- **Renewables' deep-sea mining conundrum**
- **Nearly a quarter of Earth's seafloor now mapped**

But countries failed to reach agreement on key issues of fishing rights and also funding and support for developing countries.

World Wildlife Foundation's (WWF) Senior Ocean Governance Expert Jessica Battle - who was at the negotiations - told BBC News that the Arctic was a divisive issue: "As it opens up due to climate change and we have much shorter winters, that is going to open up a whole new area of extraction."

There are concerns that without this treaty not only will marine species not be protected but also some species will never be discovered before they become extinct.

Global species assessed for extinction threat



*Assessed species include lobsters, freshwater crabs, freshwater crayfishes and freshwater shrimps

Source: IUCN Red List

BBC

Research published earlier this year, and funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, suggests that between **10% and 15% of marine species are already at risk of extinction.**

Sharks and rays are among the species set to lose out from the failure to pass the treaty.

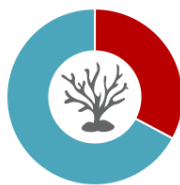
According to the IUCN they are facing a **global extinction crisis** - and are one of the most threatened species groups in the world.

Sharks and other migratory species such as turtles and whales move through the world's oceans interacting with human activities like shipping which can cause them severe injuries and death.

All species of sharks and rays are also overfished - leading to rapid population decline. Such reduction in animal numbers have been observed across most major marine groups.

One in ten marine species are at risk of extinction

Share of species at threat of extinction



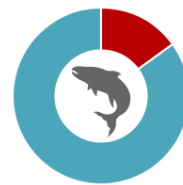
33%
reef
corals



31%
sharks
and rays



28%
selected
crustaceans*



15%
fishes

*Assessed species include lobsters, freshwater crabs, freshwater crayfishes and freshwater shrimps

Source: IUCN Red List of Threatened Species



It is not yet clear when countries will come back together to continue negotiations - but a deadline has been set for the end of the year.

They have a jam-packed calendar of international meetings on other matters between now and January - including the annual climate conference COP27 and the UN General Assembly meeting.

If the treaty does get signed there will still be further work to do. The treaty will not outline what areas of the ocean will be placed under marine protection - just the process by which organisations and countries can apply for it.

Equally the treaty is not expected to include exact figures on what financial support developing nations will receive from

developed countries, Liz Karan Project Director for the Pews High Seas Campaign told BBC News.

And Ms Karan said in the previous treaty from 1982 there were promises for support that were not fulfilled, and this has left some developing nations frustrated.

The fate of the oceans also depends on global action on climate change - which is decided as part of other UN negotiations.

The world's seas have absorbed 90% of the warming that has occurred due to increasing greenhouse gases produced by human activities, **according to Nasa**.

"The half of our planet which is high seas is protecting terrestrial life from the worst impacts of climate change," said Prof Alex Rogers from Oxford University, UK, who has provided evidence to inform the UN treaty process.