

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

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. Have you swum in the ocean? Did you see any marine animals?
2. Who do the world's oceans belong to?
3. Why are they important for life on our planet?
4. What are the biggest threats to marine life?
5. How do you think ocean life should be protected?

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. To _____ is to make sure that a law or rule is obeyed by people. (paragraph 1)
There are laws in place, but they don't have a team to police the area and _____ them.
2. If something is _____, it is likely to be harmed or destroyed. (paragraph 2)
A study found that noise pollution _____ whales and dolphins.
3. The _____ is the parts of the Earth's surface and atmosphere where plant and animal life can exist. (paragraph 3)
The roots of trees, the ocean floor, and mountain tops are all part of the Earth's _____.
4. 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)
Forests are great _____ because they absorb more carbon than they release.
5. If something is _____, it is very important or difficult to deal with because a small mistake could make very bad things happen. (paragraph 5)
A _____ habitat is an area that is essential for endangered species to survive.

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6. _____ is the ability that animals and plants have to change and make themselves especially suitable for living in a particular environment. (paragraph 7)
- Wildlife crossings along roads can help animals with climate _____.*
7. To _____ is to get or achieve something important. (paragraph 8)
- They're still trying to _____ a venue for the next international event.*
8. _____ is the management of land and water in ways that prevent it from being damaged or destroyed. (paragraph 10)
- She works in wildlife _____; she is helping to protect the rhino.*
9. _____ is dealing with a difficult situation. (paragraph 10)
- It is time to _____ pollution and try to reduce the use of plastics.*
10. A _____ is a way of solving a problem or ending an argument in which both people or groups accept that they cannot have everything they want. (paragraph 12)
- He realized that if he wanted them to stop arguing, he would need to make a _____ and agree to their terms.*
11. _____ are special areas where animals live in a natural environment protected from people. (paragraph 14)
- One summer, I volunteered at a bird _____, and I took care of a baby owl.*
12. To _____ is to come together in a group. (paragraph 14)
- Hundreds of birds _____ in the tree on the hill at sunset.*

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Karen McVeigh

28 February, 2023

- 1 Almost two-thirds of the world's ocean lies outside national boundaries. These are the "high seas", where loosely enforced rules have meant a vast portion of the planet, hundreds of miles from land, is often lawless.
- 2 Because of this, the high seas are more easily exploited than coastal seas. Currently, all countries can navigate, fish (or overfish) and do scientific research on the high seas as much as they want. 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 Members 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 protect the high seas.
- 5 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 to protect marine areas, scientists and environmentalists agree the 30x30 pledge will fail.
- 6 "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."
- 7 Karan and others are hopeful that countries will finalize a legal framework to establish a network of high sea marine protected areas (MPAs) "for adaptation and resilience" for species in a changing climate.
- 8 The conference president, Rena Lee, said that there were two sticking points: how to establish and maintain MPAs in areas that aren't governed by any individual country, and how to secure fair access to marine resources for all.
- 9 "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."
- 10 "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.
- 11 "Industrial fishers try 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.
- 12 Greenpeace warned the treaty was in danger as countries in the global north, including China, refused to compromise. The global north must seek compromises instead of arguing over minor points, it said.
- 13 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 west of the Hawaiian islands towards Russia.
- 14 "There are corridors of the sea where whales aggregate every year," 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.
- 15 "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."

Glossary

bioprospecting: the practice of exploring nature to find commercially useful products

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3 Comprehension check

a. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Since there is no one to enforce the law, people can do what they want on the high seas.
2. The ocean is the planet's largest carbon sink and provides all the oxygen for every breath we take.
3. The 30x30 pledge promises to protect 30% of the Earth's surface that is covered in water by 2030.
4. The aim of MPAs is to create safe spaces to help boost ecotourism.
5. It is difficult for countries to agree about how MPAs should be established in places not governed by individual countries.
6. Karan thinks that sharing resources should be a priority.
7. Overfishing and deep-sea mining combined are the biggest cause of environmental decline in the ocean.
8. Greenpeace urges countries that don't have resources to compromise.
9. The Costa Rica Dome is one of ten proposed sanctuaries for marine life.
10. Doug McCauley thinks that the high seas treaty could be something that will be remembered by generations to come.

4 Key language

a. Match the words to the meaning of the prefix or suffix in bold.

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. law less | a. relating to living things or someone's life: used with some nouns and adjectives |
| 2. dioxide | b. not or no: used with some adjectives and nouns that begin with 'l' to give the opposite meaning |
| 3. over fishing | c. two or twice: used with some adjectives and nouns |
| 4. illegal | d. too much: used with many verbs, nouns and adjectives |
| 5. biodiversity | e. between: used with some nouns, verbs and adjectives |
| 6. international | f. without: used with many nouns |

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b. Discuss the questions.

1. What is the most important *international* treaty?
2. What do you know about *biodiversity* in different eco systems (forests, lakes, oceans, grasslands)?
3. Is it *illegal* to hunt or fish where you live?
4. Do you think we should be worried about *overfishing*?
5. Apart from the oceans, what else absorbs carbon *dioxide*?

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Fishing on the high seas should be illegal."
- "Bioprospecting should be allowed everywhere because we might find 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 enough. More needs to be done to protect the natural world."

6 In your own words

a. Research the life, habits, and habitat of an endangered marine animal. Find out what threatens this animal the most.

b. You are going to write a letter to humans from the animal's perspective, telling them to protect the oceans and your species. Use the information to plan and write your letter.

- Introduction: introduce yourself and connect with the reader, say why you are writing
- Reasons: back up your plea with reasons and facts
- Solution: offer a solution
- Closing: call to action using a strong emotional statement to end