

# U.N. countries agree to historic ocean protection treaty

“High seas” make up around 60 percent of our oceans.

## BASIC

Members of the United Nations, or U.N., recently agreed to an important treaty to protect Earth’s oceans. **Does anyone know what a treaty is?** (An agreement between countries.) This treaty is meant to protect the animals that live in “high seas” around the world. High seas are parts of the ocean far away from any country. The high seas make up about 60 percent of our oceans. Right now, there are no laws that govern the high seas. Animals in the high seas are threatened by fishing, mining, and pollution. So, to protect these animals, U.N.

## GENERAL

In early March, members of the United Nations, or U.N., reached an agreement to create a new treaty to protect Earth’s oceans. **Does anyone know what a treaty is?** (A formal agreement between countries.) 200 countries agreed to this quote, “high seas treaty.” The goal of the treaty is to help protect animal life in international waters. While the final details of the treaty were hammered out over two weeks, the ideas behind the deal have been in the works for almost 20 years. **Why do you think it took so long to get nations to agree to this treaty?**

The treaty’s main goal is to protect wildlife in parts of the ocean known as “high seas.” Countries usually control the water and seafloor 200 miles off their coasts. The remaining ocean waters are considered

## ADVANCED

In March 2023, 200 United Nations member states agreed to a historic treaty to protect the Earth’s oceans. The treaty, known as the “high seas treaty,” has been in the works for almost two decades, and was finalized during two weeks of intense negotiations. **How difficult do you think it would be to get 200 countries to agree to a treaty?**

The primary goal of this treaty is to protect marine wildlife in areas of the ocean known as “high seas.” Countries have legal control of the waters and sea floor up to 200 nautical miles off their coastlines. The oceans beyond the 200 miles are considered high seas. High seas cover over 60 percent of our oceans and aren’t controlled by anyone nation. As a result, monitoring and protecting them from commercial activities is difficult.

countries are working together to create safe spaces in the

ocean. These areas are called “marine protected areas.” They are like underwater national parks. In the future, there will be even more marine protected areas. Fishing, mining, and pollution will be illegal in these protected areas. **Do you think this treaty does enough to protect our oceans and underwater animals? What else could be done?** NEXT



“high seas.” High seas make up about 60 percent of our oceans. These parts of the ocean aren’t controlled by any one country. As a result, only about 1.2 percent of these areas are protected. **Can you think of other ways to protect the animals that live in international waters?**

Thanks to the treaty, new marine protected areas will be created around the world. You can see two examples of marine protected areas on the screen. These are a lot like national parks, but for underwater ecosystems. These areas will be legally protected from fishing, deep sea mining, and pollution. Now, the U.N. has the difficult task of putting this treaty into practice to help protect Earth’s oceans long into the future. **Do you think this treaty will help? Why or why not?** NEXT

Right now, only about 1.2 percent of these areas are protected. **Why do you think protecting the high seas is such a challenge? Can you think of other ways to do it?**

But thanks to the new U.N. treaty, countries will now designate new marine protected areas like the two shown here. Marine protected areas are a lot like national parks. They are maintained by a country’s government and protected from commercial activities like fishing, and deep-sea mining. The new treaty will greatly expand the number of marine protected areas around the world. Now, the U.N. and its member states will have the difficult job of putting this treaty into action, a process that will likely take years. **Why do you think protecting marine wildlife is so important? What else is important about our oceans?** NEXT

# U.N. countries agree to historic ocean protection treaty (cont'd)

The world's oceans need protection now more than ever

## BASIC

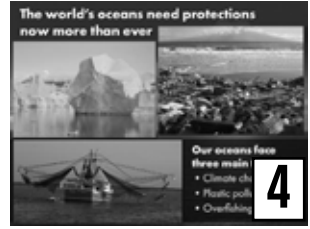
On the screen, you can see three of the biggest threats our oceans face today. **What are they?** (*Climate change, plastic pollution, and overfishing.*) Climate change is causing ocean temperatures to rise. This makes it harder for certain underwater plants and animals to survive. Coral reefs have already been damaged by climate change. Experts are worried that climate change could wipe out all coral reefs by 2100.

Plastic pollution is also a big issue. Humans toss 14 million tons of plastic into the ocean every year. Experts say this plastic kills around 1 million underwater animals every year. **How could humans**

**prevent this from happening?**

Some fishermen choose to break the law by catching

more fish than they are allowed to. **Why do you think they do this?** This can lead to overfishing, which is when the number of fish in a certain area is greatly lowered due to too much fishing. Overfishing is hurting our oceans too. **Do you think the new treaty will help solve these problems?** END



## GENERAL

Right now, our oceans face three main threats.

**From the words on the screen, what are they?** (*Climate change, plastic pollution, and overfishing.*) The largest and hardest to address is climate change. **Can anyone explain what climate change is in a few sentences?** (*The global temperature rising due to the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.*) Warming water temperatures make it harder for certain underwater animals to survive. Coral reefs for example have been hit hard by climate change. Reefs are important underwater habitats for millions of animals around the world. But scientists say they could disappear by 2100 if climate change isn't addressed.

Plastic pollution is also harming underwater animals. Research shows that humans toss 14 million tons of plastic

into the ocean every year. **Why is this a problem?** (*Plastic takes a long, long time to break down naturally, so this plastic could stay in the ocean for hundreds of years.*) Animals are harmed by this plastic when they eat it or become stuck in it. Studies show that around 1 million underwater animals are killed by plastic every year.

Lastly, overfishing is causing damage to animal populations in our oceans. **What is overfishing?** (*Removing too many fish from a body of water, resulting in the number of fish going down.*) One study found that overfishing has caused ocean animal populations to go down by almost 50 percent between 1970 and 2012. But, while these threats are serious challenges, the U.N.'s high seas treaty is a step toward keeping our oceans healthy for generations. END

## ADVANCED

The protections afforded by the U.N.'s high seas treaty will work to counter the major threats our oceans face today. **What do you think the biggest threats to our oceans and marine life are?** (*Climate change, plastic pollution, and overfishing.*) Of these threats, the most concerning is climate change. Warming water temperatures threaten marine life around the planet. Some coral reefs, for example, have already been severely damaged by warming waters. Reefs are vital ecosystems that serve as homes to millions of animals, but scientists say they could all disappear by 2100 if steps aren't taken to limit the effects of climate change.

Plastic pollution has a severe impact on marine wildlife as well. Humans throw

nearly 14 million tons of plastic into the ocean every year. **Why is this a problem?** (*Plastic takes a long time to biodegrade, or break down in nature.*) Studies have shown that plastic pollution kills more than 1 million marine animals every year.

Overfishing can do severe damage to fragile underwater ecosystems. **What does overfishing mean?** (*Depleting the stock of fish in a body of water by too much fishing.*) One study found that overfishing has caused ocean animal populations to go down by almost 50 percent between 1970 and 2012. And while these are all serious and challenging threats, the U.N. member states have shown they are willing to take drastic action to protect our oceans for generations to come. END