

# GREAT DECISIONS

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TEACHERS:  
CHECK OUT  
THE BACK PAGE

## THE HIGH SEAS TREATY

**WHY  
PROTECT THE  
OCEANS**

**THE UN  
STEPS IN**

**HOW IT  
WORKS**

**A PATH  
FORWARD**

BY ISOBEL WHITCOMB

# SAVING THE HIGH SEAS

**M**ulticolored mountains of coral, the world's tallest volcanoes, and forests of hundred-foot-tall water plants called kelp—all of this and more exists beneath the waves of Earth's oceans, which cover 71 percent of the planet. These habitats are home to millions of species, from clams that exist in trenches tens of thousands of feet deep to manatees that float lazily through sun-dappled seagrass.

But these creatures' homes are under threat. Thirty percent of fish species are **overfished**, meaning we're taking more than wild populations can replace. Birds and marine mammals gobble, inhale,

or become tangled in our plastic waste. And due to climate change, the oceans are heating up faster than many species can adapt.

Protecting the oceans isn't easy, because the vast majority of waters don't belong to anyone. Every country with a coastline has control over the waters that stretch 200 miles from its shores. They decide how people can use the plants, animals, fish, and minerals found in these marine areas—called **exclusive economic zones**—and how to protect these resources. But 95 percent of ocean habitat, by volume, falls outside of national boundaries. These waters are called the **high seas**. And until

recently, there was no law governing them. In the high seas, fisheries and developers were free to do anything from drilling for oil to dragging giant fishing nets across fragile habitat.

That changed on March 4, 2023, when an international governing body called the United Nations (UN) developed an agreement called the High Seas Treaty. Its purpose: to protect the underwater life and resources within these international waters. Marine experts are calling this a historic moment in ocean conservation. But what comes next? How will the High Seas Treaty protect the oceans? And what are the odds of success?



*Due to climate change, pollution, and other factors, the bright, colorful corals of the Great Barrier Reef are dying out, making it harder for more than seven thousand species of sea life to make their homes, find food, and reproduce.*



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Commercial fishing boats use massive nets to scoop fish from ocean waters. Overfishing can cause major environmental harm by reducing the food supply for sea life.

## SEAS UNDER SIEGE

We have only just begun to understand the world of life that exists beneath the waves. Humans have discovered just a small fraction of the life under the sea—around 9 percent, scientists estimate. A whopping 80 percent of the oceans are completely uncharted.

“We are land-dwelling animals,” said Daniel Pauly, a fisheries biologist at the [Sea Around Us Initiative](#). “We don’t see the world below the surface.” This bias makes it hard to see—and care about—the impact we have on the oceans, Pauly said. Since 1970, we’ve halved the number of fish in our oceans. Each year, we dump eleven million tons of plastic—a quantity so large that in a few years’ time, the oceans could contain one pound of plastic for every three pounds of fish.

Even our air pollution is changing ocean habitats. When we burn **fossil fuels**, like [gasoline](#) and [coal](#), we release carbon dioxide (CO2) into the atmosphere. Our

oceans then absorb that CO2 and become more acidic. Meanwhile, CO2 in the atmosphere traps heat, warming our world and the oceans. This warmer, more acidic environment is inhospitable to life.

Despite these threats, the high seas have remained relatively safe from human activities. Only the largest vessels can fish thousands of miles from a coastline, and we don’t yet have the technology

to dive to the deepest parts of the ocean. But as technology for exploring the oceans advances, threats to the high seas are mounting. Those include oil drilling in some of the deepest parts of the ocean, offshore power plants that harvest energy from wind, and **deep sea mining**—extracting rare minerals from seabeds hundreds of feet below the surface. Scientists say that we’re in the middle of a marine

## THE DEBATE

### SHOULD THERE BE A NATIONAL BAN ON PLASTIC BAGS?

#### YES

- ✓ Plastic bag bans have already been proven to reduce the number of bags that appear during beach cleanups.
- ✓ We don’t need plastic bags. Reusable bags are inexpensive and readily available.
- ✓ It takes one thousand years for a plastic bag to degrade in a landfill.

#### NO

- ✗ Many states and cities are already passing their own plastic bag bans.
- ✗ Plastic bags are convenient and inexpensive.
- ✗ Paper and cotton bags can also cause environmental harm.



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Heilry/Getty Images

*Offshore oil drilling increases the risk of oil spills, which are enormously harmful to ocean ecosystems.*

“industrial revolution”—and that marine extinctions will skyrocket if these activities continue without any kind of regulation. An agreement to protect these habitats has never been more necessary.

### A GLOBAL EFFORT

The UN was founded after World War II with the goal of preventing another conflict of that proportion from ever happening again. It isn’t a government; instead, it’s a forum where **member states** can gather to discuss global issues and propose [solutions](#) to those problems.

Today, the UN has 193 member states and addresses a wide range of global issues, from human rights to the environment. It’s thanks to the UN that we eradicated smallpox and that chemicals didn’t eat [a giant hole in the ozone layer](#), a key protective part of our atmosphere. You can also thank the UN for the **Paris Agreement**—a treaty on climate change that holds countries responsible for reducing their own carbon emissions.

UN delegates first proposed an international agreement concerning the high seas nearly twenty years ago. But it wasn’t until 2018 that countries officially began meeting to discuss specific rules and regulations. Each year, delegates gathered at the UN headquarters in New York City. Together, they tackled a series of

tough questions: should everyone have the ability to use resources from the high seas however they see fit, or should we preserve the high seas for future generations? Should countries that benefit from undersea discoveries have to share information and resources with other nations? Some meetings involved so much disagreement that they lasted for days on end.

Delegates finally came to an agreement in March of this year. Rena Lee, a Singaporean diplomat and the leader of the conference, announced the victory. Stepping up to a podium she announced to the crowd of diplomats: “The ship has reached the shore.”

### AN UNDERWATER NATIONAL PARKS SYSTEM

The High Seas Treaty aims to protect the oceans in two major ways. The first is a series of steps that developers have to go through

## THE DEBATE


### SHOULD WE MINE THE OCEANS FOR MINERALS?

YES

- ✓ Many of the minerals we need for green technologies such as electric cars and wind turbines are found beneath the ocean floor.
- ✓ Demand for rare minerals is expected to double or triple by 2030.
- ✓ Without deep-sea mining, demand for land-based mining could increase, negatively impacting the habitats and creatures there.

NO

- ✗ Deep sea mining creates clouds of toxic sediments, which poison marine food chains and smother plant life when they settle.
- ✗ Many seabeds that contain precious minerals are also home to rare lifeforms, many of which are still unknown to science.
- ✗ Noise and lights from mining could change the behavior of sea life.



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if they want to conduct any kind of activity, like mining and drilling for oil, in international waters. Countries and private companies have to bring in scientists to evaluate how a proposed activity will affect the marine environment. Then, they have to make those results publicly available. Other members of the UN have the power to approve or deny a project based on those findings. “This process provides transparency,” said Britt Bello, an environmental policy consultant with the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#). “You have something in place to manage activities where there wasn’t anything before.”

The High Seas Treaty’s second approach to protecting the oceans: **Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)**. MPAs are stretches of ocean where human activities are restricted. You can think of them as underwater national parks, Pauly says. MPAs vary in the protections they offer, but the strictest prevent any human from entering without a special permit—even for activities like snorkeling. MPAs have already existed for some time, but few have been established in the high seas. The treaty will change that.

The effectiveness of MPAs has already been proven. For example, in Hawaii’s Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, populations of endangered Hawaiian monk seals have begun to rebound after six decades of rapid decline. The population of yellowfin tuna in and around the MPA has also increased dramatically.

MPAs will also indirectly protect marine life from the impacts of climate change and ocean



*UN members and other supporters of the High Seas Treaty celebrate in September 2023 as the treaty opens for signatures.*

acidification, Bello said. Though the treaty doesn’t directly address these issues, wildlife are better able to cope with these stressors when they have healthy habitats to retreat to. “The ocean has shown to be incredibly resilient when we give it space to rebound,” Bello said.

## WHAT NOW?

The High Seas Treaty is a landmark moment in conservation. But the work isn’t over. Before it goes fully into effect, sixty UN member states need to **ratify** the treaty. After this, the UN will set up a Conference of Parties (COP)—a governing body set up specifically to implement the treaty. The COP will monitor whether member states are following the terms of the treaty and revise the treaty every three years. The High Seas Treaty also sets up a scientific and technical body, a board of experts that will advise UN delegates.

Enforcing the treaty could be

tricky. The United Nations doesn’t have a **judicial system**. This means there is no international court to enforce environmental laws and no punishments in place for those who violate them. So how do you make sure no one violates the treaty? It’s actually not hard to spot activity on the High Sea, Pauly said. It takes tremendous resources to get to these remote regions—huge fishing vessels, oil rigs, and mining operations. With satellites all over the globe, you can’t hide these activities. “The high sea is very visible from space. When people think that it would be difficult to monitor the high seas, it is actually the opposite,” Pauly said.

But while the UN might not be able to take someone to court or put them in prison, an international treaty provides a space for nations to agree on a path forward, and ways to make that path forward easier.



Jeffrey Isaac Greenberg 12+/Alamy Images

Student volunteers clear trash from a beach in Miami, Florida.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Protecting the oceans is an international effort, but change begins on an individual scale. From lifestyle choices to education, here's what teens can do.

- **Ditch plastic.** By choosing plastic-free or reusable alternatives, you can help prevent plastic from piling up in the oceans. When you get lunch to go, opt for pizza on a paper plate. Ask baristas to make your coffee in a reusable cup.

Seek out stores that allow you to trade in or reuse containers after you're done with them.

- **Limit the fish in your diet.** There's no other way to put it: we are pulling fish from our oceans at a rate that nature can't sustain. While supermarkets and restaurants may boast "sustainably-caught" alternatives, this phrase is pretty meaningless, said Daniel Pauly. The problem is that once fish leave the boats that catch them, sustainably and unsustainably caught all get mixed together, so you don't know what you're actually getting.

- **Get involved.** Engage in [beach cleanups](#) or river restoration efforts with organizations that protect waterways—whether it's the ocean or your local creek. "Every stream, every river, every bay, is connected to the ocean," said Bello.
- **Study marine issues.** If you're interested in ocean conservation, consider pursuing a career in marine sciences or management. Take classes in environmental sciences or marine biology. Apply for [internships and summer programs](#) with [ocean conservation organizations](#).

- **Write or call elected officials** to let them know what you think about the High Seas Treaty and ocean conservation in general.

- **Vote when you are old enough.** In most cases, you can't vote until you're 18, but in many states you can register at 16 or 17, and you'll be all set when 18 rolls around.

## THE DEBATE

### SHOULD PEOPLE STOP EATING FISH?

#### YES

- ✓ People don't need to eat fish to survive.
- ✓ Vegetarian and vegan diets are better for the environment.
- ✓ It's impossible to know whether fish were caught sustainably.

#### NO

- ✗ Fish are a great source of protein and other nutrients.
- ✗ Many people don't have access to other foods that provide the same nutrition.
- ✗ Eating fish has less impact on climate change than other types of meat.



Keith Homan/Shutterstock

# PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE



## Gabriel Taliaferrow

Did you know that New York City was once surrounded by massive reefs of oysters? Before they were wiped out by humans, these mollusks filtered pollutants out of waterways, buffered New York Harbor against storms, and provided habitats to other wildlife.

At the age of 15, Gabriel Taliaferrow became involved in New York City's [Billion Oyster Project](#)—a program that seeks to restore New York City's oyster reefs. Hours before school began each morning, Taliaferrow, a certified scuba diver, would swim under the waves to plant cages of live oysters, survey new reefs, and search for native oysters. Today, Taliaferrow is a photographer who showcases the beauty of underwater ecosystems. Since he participated in BOP, the organization has reintroduced one hundred live oysters to the wild.

## Kristal Ambrose

When she was 22, Kristal Ambrose first visited the [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#)—islands of trash in the North Pacific Ocean, pushed together by ocean currents. She was shocked by the sight of fish dying among fragments of toys, plastic bags, and straws. The expedition inspired her to found the [Bahamas Plastic Movement](#), an organization that engages young people in reducing plastic waste.

Through her organization, Ambrose created programs, including tuition-free youth camps, to train budding environmental stewards. Students would conduct surveys of plastic and dissect fish to document their stomach content. Finally, Ambrose drafted a policy to ban single-use plastics. Five years later, her ban was enacted in the Bahamas.



Dorian Curtis Jr. and Jawanza Small

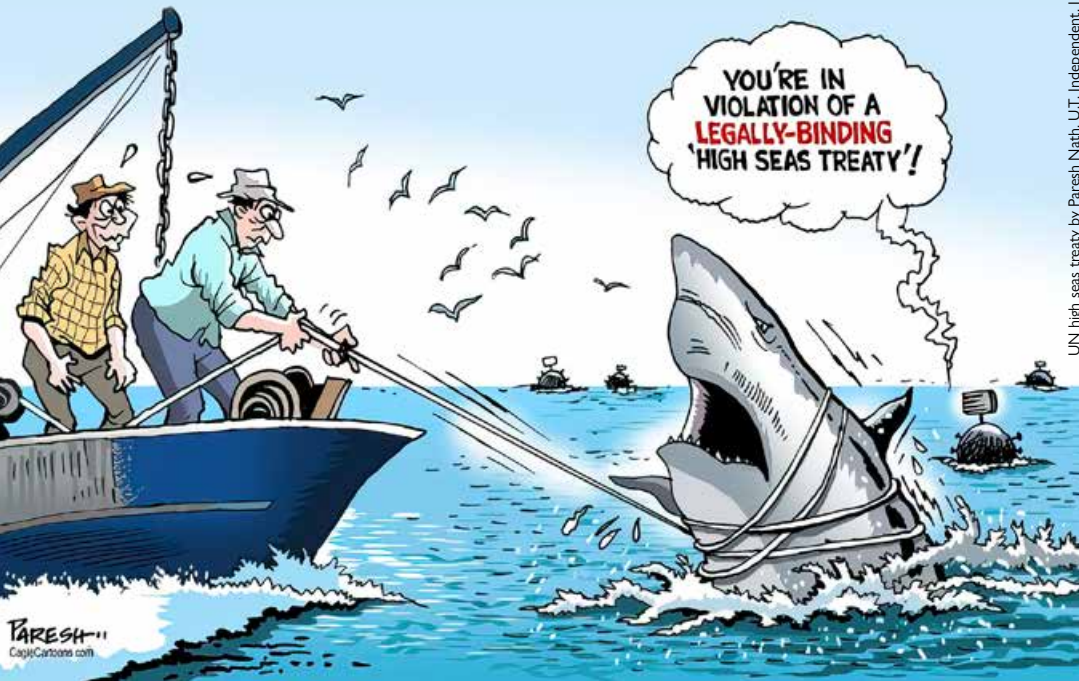


Robert Beck / Sports Illustrated/Getty Images

## Alex Weber and Jack Johnson

While diving in the Carmel Bay, off the coast of central California, friends Weber and Johnston came across a dismaying sight: hundreds of golf balls sitting on the ocean floor. The trash had found its way into the ocean from nearby resorts, and some had been sitting there for decades. The rubbery core of the golf balls, exposed when they decay, looks just like the seagrass that birds and other wildlife munch on.

In response, Weber and Johnson founded the [Plastic Pick-Up](#). They began kayaking out into the freezing waters of the bay, then diving down to fetch the balls. So far, they've collected tens of thousands. Last year, they turned twenty thousand of these pieces of trash into an art installation at the BeachLife Music Festival in Southern California.



UN high seas treaty by Paresah Nath, U.T. Independent, India/PoliticalCartoons.com



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### NEXT ISSUE: The United States and China

**GREAT DECISIONS HIGH SEAS TREATY**  
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### ON THE HOOK

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? Why do or don't you agree?
2. If the UN cannot directly punish people for violating the treaty, why will or won't anyone follow its rules?
3. What do you think would be a fair punishment for violating the High Seas Treaty? Explain why.

### NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. If you could change one thing about the High Seas Treaty, what would it be, and why?
2. What else, if anything, could countries do to reduce the harm being done to oceans?
3. **YOUR STORY:** How do you feel when you see photos or videos of ruined coral reefs and other damage to ocean environments?

#### KEY WORDS & TERMS

deep sea mining	member states
exclusive economic zones	overfished
fossil fuels	Paris Agreement
high seas	ratify
judicial system	United Nations
Marine Protected Areas	