



By: TA | AP Insight

Will the world's first legally binding agreement be able to protect marine life?



The world's first legally binding agreement to protect marine life in international waters took effect Saturday, marking a historic moment for ocean conservation after nearly two decades of negotiations.

The **High Seas Treaty** will govern nearly half the planet's surface – the vast ocean areas beyond any country's control.

These waters face mounting threats from destructive fishing practices, **shipping**, **plastic pollution**, overfishing and potential **deep sea mining**, all compounded by climate change.

The ocean absorbs carbon dioxide and produces oxygen, making its health critical for addressing the climate crisis.

The treaty entered into force 120 days after it reached the threshold of ratification by 60 countries in September.

As of Friday, 83 countries had ratified it, including the recent addition of major maritime powers such as China and Japan.

The treaty creates the first framework for establishing Marine Protected Areas on the high seas, which make up about two-thirds of the world's ocean.

Currently, only around 1% of these international waters are protected.

Immediate obligations for countries

From Saturday, ratifying countries must begin working together on ocean science and technology as well as help developing nations build capacity to participate in ocean governance.

Companies planning activities that could harm marine life must conduct environmental impact assessments that meet the treaty's standards.

Those conducting research on ocean

organisms that could be used commercially, such as for new medicines, must notify other countries and share their findings.

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Perhaps most significantly, countries must now promote the treaty's conservation goals when they participate in other international bodies that regulate ocean activities, such as regional fisheries organizations, the International Maritime Organization and the International Seabed Authority.

While key institutions like the treaty's secretariat and scientific body are still being developed, countries can begin preparing proposals for Marine Protected Areas immediately. Potential sites include the Emperor Seamounts in the North Pacific, the Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic and the Salas y Gomez and Nazca Ridges off South America.

Pressure to act quickly

Conservationists warn governments must act quickly to achieve the global goal of protecting 30% of the world's oceans by 2030 – a target scientists say is critical for ocean health.

Because the high seas make up such a vast portion of the oceans, their protection is essential to reaching that goal.

"The marine protected areas under the treaty will only be as strong as the governments make them," said Megan Randles, global political lead for Greenpeace's Ocean Campaign. "We can't trust big fishing industry players to simply stop fishing in these critical ecosystems. We need governments to use the treaty to force their hands."

How those protected areas will actually be monitored and enforced is undecided.

Countries are exploring various options, from satellite technology to coordinating patrols between multiple nations to using other UN agencies to help with oversight, said Rebecca Hubbard, director of the High Seas Alliance.

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Those details will be worked out as the first protected areas take shape.

Within a year, the treaty's first Conference of Parties will meet to decide key operational details, from budgets to the makeup of various committees.

Countries have been working through many of those questions at preparatory meetings, with a final session scheduled for late March.

The earliest any Marine Protected Areas could actually win approval would be at the second COP, since the scientific body that will review proposals hasn't yet been established.

The U.S. is notably absent

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Under international law, signatory countries are expected to comply with treaty objectives even before ratification.

"The High Seas Treaty has such incredibly broad and strong political support from across all regions of the world," said Hubbard. "Whilst it's disappointing that the U.S. hasn't yet ratified, it doesn't undermine its momentum and the support that it has already."

Advocates emphasize that broad support must now turn into rapid implementation.

"The treaty is a sign that in a divided world, protecting nature and protecting our global commons can still triumph over political rivalries," Randles said. "The ocean connects us all."