

UN tries anew to finish treaty protecting the high seas

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UN member states on Monday open two weeks of negotiations aimed at finally reaching a treaty meant to protect and preserve vast areas of the world's oceans.

UN member states embraced "positive energy" Monday as they launched two weeks of negotiations aimed at finally reaching a treaty meant to

protect and preserve vast areas of the world's oceans.

After more than 15 years of formal and informal talks, this is the third time in less than a year that negotiators have converged on New York in what, yet again, is supposed to be a final and conclusive round.

But as the talks, set to run through March 3, opened on Monday, cautious optimism appeared to be taking hold.

"I hope we've come together here with a will to get us to the finish line," conference chair Rena Lee said as the talks began, adding that "an agreement that is universal, that is effective, that is implementable and that is future-proof is within our reach."

At the conclusion of the opening day, she added: "There is a lot of positive energy in this room. So it behooves us to enhance this positive energy, keep our focus, keep our eyes on the prize, and really work to make this (conference) final."

Lee also welcomed actor and activist Jane Fonda, who handed her a petition on behalf of ocean defenders worldwide, with 5.5 million signatures calling for a "strong" treaty.

"We're losing the ocean. And if we lose the ocean, we lose us," the 85-year-old told AFP.

"This is the fight that will determine whether there's a tomorrow for human beings."

A historic agreement reached in Montreal in December at the United Nation's COP15 conference on biodiversity is helping fuel the sense of promise.



US actor Jane Fonda (R) hands a petition with 5.5 million signatures from 157 countries calling for a strong treaty on the high seas to conference chair Rena Lee.

Countries then committed themselves to protecting 30 percent of the world's lands and seas by 2030—a nearly impossible challenge if it fails to include the high seas, of which only about one percent is now protected.

"We're optimistic the COP15 biodiversity agreement will provide the shot in the arm needed for governments to get this important agreement over the line," Pepe Clarke, Oceans Practice Leader for WWF International, said in a press release.

The high seas begin at the border of countries' Exclusive Economic Zones, which extend up to 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) from coastlines. They thus fall under the jurisdiction of no country.

While the high seas comprise more than 60 percent of the world's oceans and nearly half the planet's surface, they have long drawn far less attention than coastal waters and a few iconic species.

But with no borders at sea, there is "just one ocean, and a healthy ocean means a healthy planet," Nathalie Rey of the High Seas Alliance, which includes some 40 NGOs, told AFP.

'One final chance'

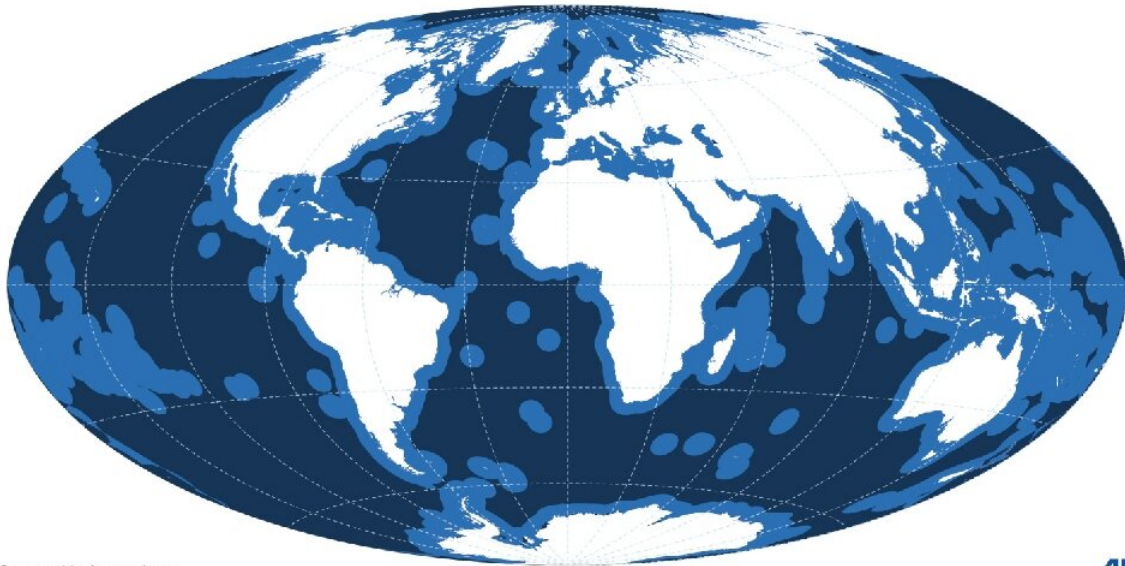
Ocean ecosystems, threatened by climate change, pollution and overfishing, create half the oxygen we breathe and limit global warming by absorbing much of the carbon dioxide emitted by human activities.

Despite the optimism of some observers and the informal talks since the last session in August, ocean defenders warn that failure is still possible.

"If they do fail again, I think it really calls into question the process itself," Liz Karan of Pew Charitable Trusts told AFP.

Ocean jurisdictions

■ national Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) ■ High seas (international waters)



Source: Marine regions

AFP 

Map showing the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of countries and the international waters of the high seas.

Laura Meller of Greenpeace Nordic warned that "we're already in extra time."

"These talks are one final chance to deliver. Governments must not fail."

The draft treaty, full of parenthetical clauses and multiple options, reflects the long list of contentious issues still on the table.

While the principle of creating marine protected areas is a core part of the mandate, delegations remain divided on how exactly these sanctuary zones would be established.

There is also no agreement on how to assess the environmental impact of activities like mining in the high seas.

And debate continues over how to divide eventual profits from the collection—by pharmaceutical, chemical or cosmetic manufacturers, for example—of newly discovered marine substances.

Developing countries, without the means to afford costly research, say they fear being left aside while others make windfall gains.

And during August's session, observers accused rich countries, notably European Union members, of making only a last-minute gesture in this direction.

Ocean defenders like Fonda say that given the complexity and vast reach of a treaty and the need to work with agencies with varying levels of maritime authority, strong language is vital.

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