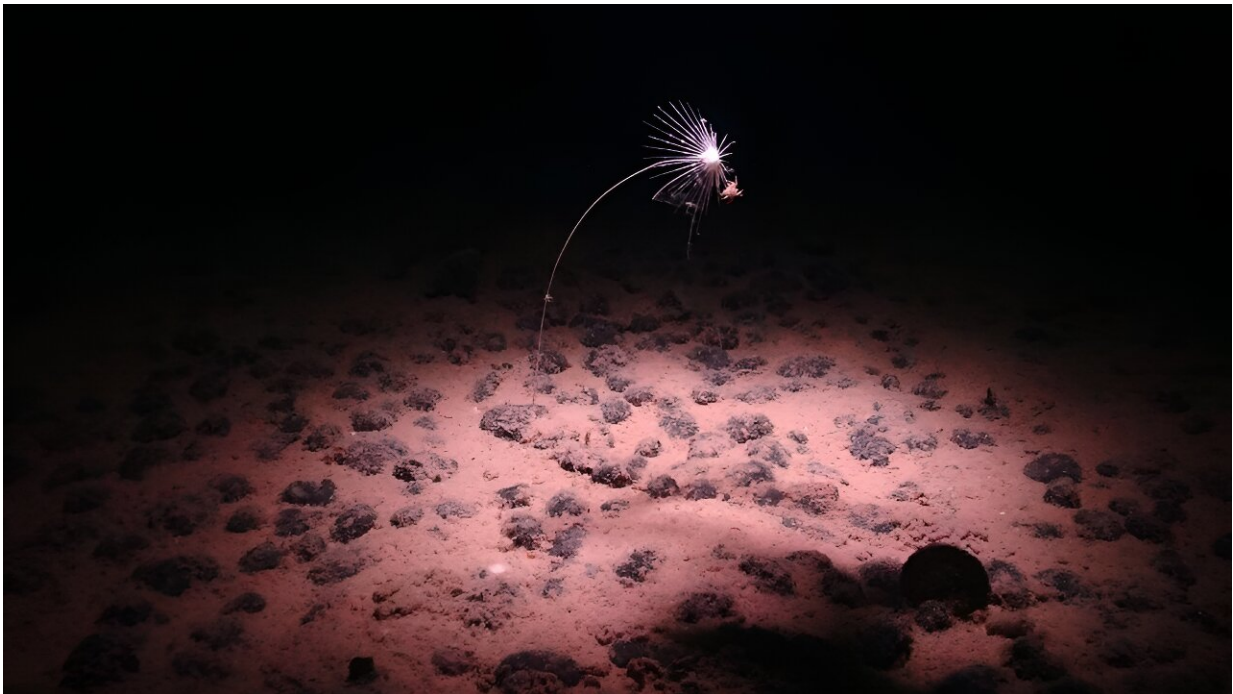


Deep sea mining opponents suffer major setback

August 3 2024, by Amélie BOTTOLLIER-DEPOIS



A handout image made available by the National Oceanography Centre shows a carnivorous sponge, *Axoniderma mexicana*, photographed during a recent expedition to the NE Pacific abyss and found in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone (CCZ).

Opponents of deep sea mining suffered a serious setback Friday when they failed to take a first step toward an international moratorium on the controversial practice.

Until now, those in favor of such mining—which would deliver minerals key to the green transition but with a potentially high environmental cost—have managed to prevent the International Seabed Authority (ISA) from even taking up any debate on the subject.

This time, the debate took place, but a draft calling for a "dialogue" toward "the development of a general policy... for the protection and preservation of the marine environment" did not advance after a week of talks in Kingston, Jamaica.

Numerous delegations, from China to Saudi Arabia to the Africa group of member states, said the draft lacked clarity and that the ISA's full assembly of 168 members was not the forum to make any decision on the protection of marine habitats.

Instead, those countries said the Council, made up of 36 states, should decide.

Faced with consistent opposition, Chile withdrew the draft measure as the assembly's annual session—which makes decisions by consensus—drew to a close.

"We are somewhat disappointed," said Chilean representative Salvador Vega Telias. Though he believed he had support from a majority of states, he opted to shelve the discussions until July 2025—a proposal that was not approved either.

Deep sea mining in international waters involves scraping the ocean floor for minerals like nickel, cobalt and copper, crucial for renewable energy technology.

Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the ISA is responsible for both protecting the seabed in areas beyond national

jurisdictions and for overseeing any exploration or exploitation of resources in those zones.

Deep sea mining has not yet taken place beyond the experimental and exploratory stage.

The ISA's Council, which for now only grants exploration contracts, has been drawing up commercial exploitation rules for more than a decade. They are aiming to adopt a mining code in 2025.

Non-governmental organizations and scientists warn that [deep sea mining](#) could damage habitats and harm species that are little understood, but are potentially important to the food chain.

In addition, they point to the risk of disrupting the ocean's capacity to absorb carbon emitted by human activities, and the noise that could disturb species such as whales.

'Necessity for our survival'

However, multiple countries have lined up exploratory contracts and pursued tests.

Nauru, a tiny Pacific island country, has successfully pushed the ISA to allow exploitation applications to be submitted, even in the absence of a mining code.

The clock is ticking as Canada's The Metals Company (TMC)—an industry giant—and Nauru Ocean Resources Inc (NORI), its subsidiary, move forward with plans to harvest mineral-rich "polymetallic nodules" in the Clarion-Clipperton fracture zone (CCZ) in the Pacific.

An application from the Nauru government on behalf of NORI to start

commercial mining operations is being prepared for submission to the ISA.

"The responsible development of deep sea minerals is not just an opportunity for Nauru and other [small island](#) developing states," Nauru President David Adeang said earlier this week. "It is a necessity for our survival in a rapidly changing world."

'Far greater urgency'

More than 30 countries have called for a moratorium on deep sea mining, including France, Canada, Chile, Brazil and the United Kingdom.

And a new study published last month showed that the mineral-rich nodules that mining companies wish to harvest from the [ocean floor](#) produce oxygen.

The groundbreaking study was the first instance of the production of oxygen by non-living sources, and without sunlight.

"Public demand and political support for stopping deep sea mining from harming the oceans has never been stronger," Louisa Casson, a campaigner with the international NGO Greenpeace, told AFP.

"With the threat of a company applying to mine the oceans hanging over us all, it's clear that we need far greater urgency from governments at the ISA to turn these words into action."

In that context, NGOs applauded the election of Brazil's Leticia Carvalho to replace Michael Lodge of Britain as the ISA's secretary general as of January 2025.

Lodge had been criticized for his pro-business stances, and was also under fire after a New York Times investigation accused the ISA's leadership of misusing funds—claims that the ISA Secretariat has denied.

"This is a new chapter," the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition said on X.

"Reforming the ISA to protect and manage the deep sea for the benefit of humankind is crucial."

© 2024 AFP

Citation: Deep sea mining opponents suffer major setback (2024, August 3) retrieved 3 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-deep-sea-opponents-major-setback.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.