

Canada must anchor an ambitious Global Ocean Treaty before year's end

By Brandon Wei | Opinion | September 13th 2022



The oceans have borne the brunt of the climate crisis and have suffered catastrophic losses across ecosystems and food chains. Photo by Francesco Ungaro/Unsplash

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What will it take for world leaders to agree on how to protect half the planet?

That's the question scientists, environmentalists and ocean-concerned citizens are left asking after the [latest collapse](#) of UN negotiations on a [Global Ocean Treaty](#) last month. And it's the question they've been asking for the last 20 years since a treaty was first discussed.

We can't afford to wait any longer for an answer.

The oceans have borne the brunt of the climate crisis and suffered catastrophic losses across ecosystems and food chains, all while regulating our climate and providing food security and livelihoods for coastal communities. Two-thirds of the oceans — comprising half the planet — are what's called the high seas: areas beyond the jurisdiction of any one country. They're some of the most biologically important, and stressed, regions in the world.

They're also among the least protected. Only about [one per cent of the high seas](#) have proper protection, leaving them vulnerable to threats such as industrial fishing, ship traffic, pollution, noise and deep-sea mining.

Scientists say we need to protect [at least 30 per cent](#) of the world's oceans by 2030, commonly called the [30x30 initiative](#). This is the minimum to allow marine life to adapt to changes in the oceans from the climate crisis and build resilience and create space for the recovery of threatened species and habitats while safeguarding ocean-dependent livelihoods. [More than 100 countries](#) — including Canada — committed to this goal. And in June, Canada further [pledged](#) to secure a Global Ocean Treaty by the end of this year with other G7 leaders.

Last month, these leaders had the chance to make good on their commitment. Much progress was made during the final 48 hours of the fifth round of Global Ocean Treaty talks, [according to reports](#), but time ran out before a treaty could be secured. And now the clock is ticking — not only for leaders to secure a treaty before the end of the year, but to logistically meet the 30x30 goal [before the damage becomes irreversible](#). Sadly, what could have been a once-in-a-generation opportunity to land a monumental conservation victory remains, once again, lost at sea.

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As a member of the [High Ambition Coalition](#), Canada needs to lead on delivering an ambitious treaty. That means calling for an emergency UN meeting this year to conclude negotiations and finalize an impactful treaty with teeth. It means a treaty that enshrines equitable access and sharing to marine genetic resources because a few rich countries should not be the sole beneficiaries of the global commons. And, finally, it also means a treaty that empowers the UN decision-making body, the Conference of Parties, or COP, to protect global waters by establishing a network of ocean sanctuaries — highly or fully protected areas free from destructive industries — charting the route to our 30x30 goal.

An empowered [Conference of Parties](#) is particularly important because leaving marine protection to regional bodies runs the risk of creating a [patchwork of “paper parks”](#): areas that might have protection on paper but lack sufficient management to enforce it. We need a treaty that puts its promises on paper into practice. And quickly.

Canada must take a firmer grip on our collective ship's wheel, steer it home and secure the protection that life in and adjacent to the oceans so desperately needs and deserves. Canada's leadership needs to show up and speak up.

A treaty wasn't the only thing lost at sea in the latest round of negotiations; Canada's leadership was missing in action and publicly silent, with neither the Prime Minister's Office nor one responsible minister — [Fisheries and Oceans Minister Joyce Murray](#), Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly, Environment and Climate Change Minister Steven Guilbeault — even acknowledging the talks were happening.

These talks directly relate to commitments made by our federal government concerning biodiversity on half the planet. When pressed, the federal government only offered a [statement](#) saying Canada is “firmly committed to the conclusion of a high seas treaty.”

Now's the time for our leaders to prove it. Commitments without conduct won't save the oceans. But an ambitious treaty will give them a fighting chance.

Brandon Wei works with Greenpeace Canada's oceans and plastics campaign.

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