

# The UN High Seas Treaty: Protecting Our Ocean's Future

The UN High Seas Treaty, formally known as the BBNJ Agreement (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction), represents a landmark international effort to protect marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction—covering approximately 60% of our oceans.

This crucial agreement addresses significant governance gaps in international waters, ensures sustainable use of marine resources, and supports global conservation targets like the ambitious "30 by 30" initiative. As we explore this treaty's importance, we'll examine how it safeguards our ocean's future through environmental assessments, capacity building, and international cooperation.

 **by John Troughton**



# Understanding the High Seas Treaty

## Official Name

Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement)

## Common Names

UN High Seas Treaty, Global Ocean Treaty (though these popularized names have some controversy)

## Jurisdiction

Areas beyond national jurisdiction, covering approximately 60% of the world's oceans

The treaty operates under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), filling critical legal gaps in ocean governance. It establishes a comprehensive framework for protecting marine biodiversity while ensuring sustainable resource management in these vast, previously underregulated areas.



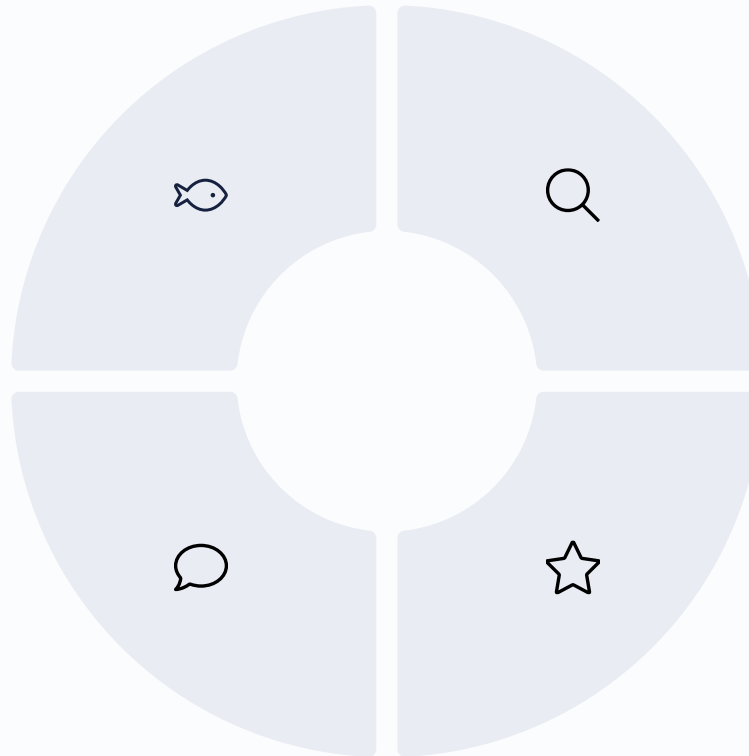
# Why Ocean Protection Matters

## Biodiversity Hotspots

Home to unique ecosystems like deep-water corals and critical migratory routes for species such as whales and sharks

## Sustainable Resources

Contains valuable marine genetic resources with significant potential for biotechnology and other industries



## Climate Regulation

Oceans play a vital role in global climate systems and carbon sequestration

## Ecological Balance

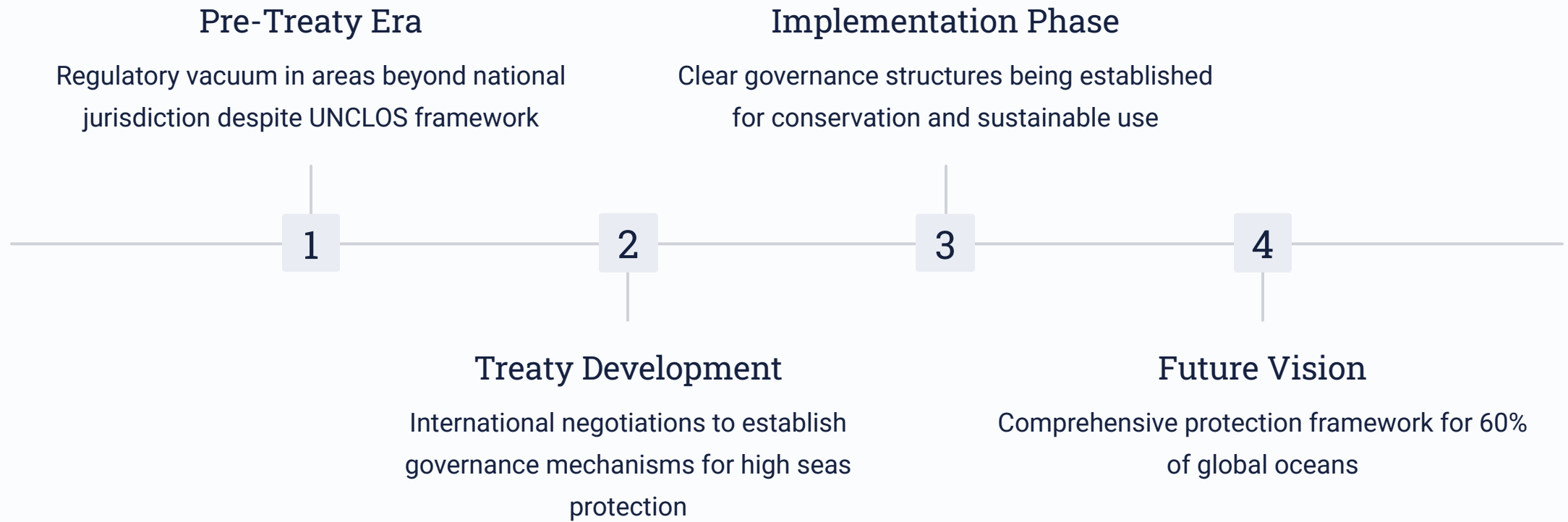
High seas are critical for maintaining global ecological equilibrium

The high seas represent some of the largest reservoirs of biodiversity on Earth. These areas face mounting threats from human activities including overfishing, pollution, and climate change impacts, making protection increasingly urgent for global ecological health.





# Filling Critical Governance Gaps



Before the BBNJ Agreement, there was no comprehensive legal framework specifically designed for conserving marine biodiversity in international waters. This created a significant governance gap that allowed unregulated exploitation and inadequate conservation measures.

The treaty addresses this vacuum by establishing clear rules and mechanisms for governance, creating a foundation for international cooperation in ocean stewardship.

# Marine Protected Areas: A Critical Tool

1%

Current Protection

Only about 1% of high seas currently have protected status

30%

2030 Target

Global conservation goal for ocean protection by 2030

60%

Ocean Coverage

Percentage of oceans in areas beyond national jurisdiction

The BBNJ Agreement enables the creation of marine protected areas (MPAs) in international waters, which is crucial for conserving biodiversity hotspots. These protected zones serve as safe havens for marine species and ecosystems, allowing them to recover from human impacts and build resilience against climate change.

MPAs are essential for meeting the "30 by 30" target under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030.







# Environmental Impact Assessments



## Identify Potential Impacts

Assessment of possible environmental effects before activities commence



## Evaluate Severity

Analysis of impact magnitude, including cumulative effects with other activities



## Develop Mitigation Measures

Creation of strategies to minimize or offset negative impacts



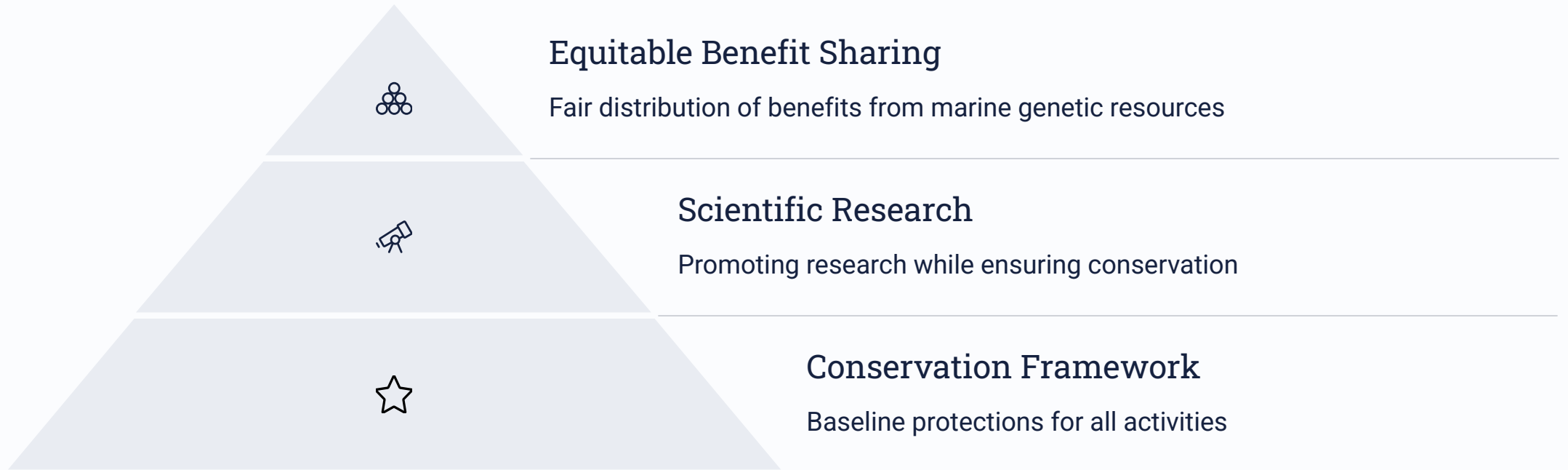
## Monitor Outcomes

Ongoing assessment of actual impacts and mitigation effectiveness

Human activities such as deep-sea mining, shipping, and industrial fishing can have significant environmental impacts on fragile marine ecosystems. The treaty mandates Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for such activities, ensuring that potential harm is thoroughly assessed and mitigated.

This process is particularly important for addressing cumulative effects—where multiple activities combine to create greater impacts than any single action alone.

# Sustainable Use of Marine Resources



The high seas contain valuable marine genetic resources with significant potential for biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and other industries. The BBNJ Agreement ensures the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from these resources, promoting sustainable use while preventing unregulated exploitation.

This balanced approach allows for scientific advancement and economic development while maintaining strong conservation principles, addressing historical inequities in access to and benefits from marine resources.

# Capacity Building and Technology Transfer



Developing countries often lack the resources and expertise for effective marine conservation and sustainable resource management. The BBNJ Agreement includes robust provisions for capacity building and technology transfer to help these nations participate fully in conservation efforts.

This approach ensures that all countries, regardless of their economic development, can contribute to and benefit from the protection and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.



# Global Cooperation on a Shared Resource



The ocean is truly a global commons, requiring international cooperation for effective management and protection. The treaty facilitates collaboration among nations, ensuring a unified approach to addressing high seas challenges that no single country could tackle alone.

This cooperative framework allows for coordinated conservation efforts, shared scientific research, and collective monitoring of marine ecosystems, creating a more effective system than the previous fragmented approach to high seas governance.

# Addressing Cumulative Human Impacts



## Fishing Pressure

Industrial fishing operations can deplete fish stocks and damage seafloor habitats through practices like bottom trawling, affecting entire marine food webs.



## Deep-Sea Mining

Emerging industry that could disrupt fragile deep-sea ecosystems that have evolved over millions of years with minimal disturbance.



## Pollution

Chemical, plastic, and noise pollution from shipping and other industries can have far-reaching effects on marine organisms and habitats.

The high seas are subject to multiple human activities whose combined effects can be devastating to marine ecosystems. The treaty provides a holistic approach to managing these cumulative impacts, ensuring comprehensive protection of ocean health through coordinated assessment and management.

By considering the total effect of various activities rather than addressing each in isolation, the BBNJ Agreement creates a more effective framework for sustainable ocean management.

# Ratification Status and Next Steps



## Treaty Signing

110 countries have signed as of May 2025

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## Ratification Process

21 countries have ratified the agreement

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## Entry Into Force

Requires 60 ratifications to become binding

As of May 12, 2025, the BBNJ Agreement continues through the ratification process, with 110 countries having signed and 21 having ratified it. The treaty requires 60 ratifications to enter into force and become legally binding.

For those interested in learning more about the treaty and its progress, resources are available through organizations like the Pew Charitable Trusts and the High Seas Alliance, which provide detailed information on the agreement's provisions and implementation status.