[**High Seas Treaty**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774808/high-seas-treaty)

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OCEANS provide a wide range of eco-services that sustain life on Earth for humans, animals, and other species. Oceans regulate climate, drive weather systems, and contribute to meeting the global challenge of food security. Covering two-thirds of Earth’s surface, they are a source of oxygen and provide storage for a quarter of the carbon dioxide produced by human actions. The protection of the ocean and its rich biodiversity is, therefore, vital to preventing the planet from becoming uninhabitable.

The current international framework for conserving marine biodiversity is limited to the territorial waters of individual countries. Processes and activities of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity are only applicable to the 39 per cent of oceans that come under the jurisdiction of its parties. Protecting marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction — known as the ‘high seas’ — remains in uncharted waters, barring a portion in the Antarctic and northeast Atlantic Ocean.

The absence of a global governance system for the high seas — which account for almost two-thirds of the oceans — is a major reason behind the deteriorating conditions of the oceans. It has reduced the impact of multilateral collaboration within the territorial waters of countries.

In the last half century, 66pc of the oceans have been significantly altered as Services. Overfishing is the largest threat to marine ecosystems. Climate change and pollution contribute no less. About 17 million tonnes of plastic waste entered the oceans in 2021, making up 85pc of marine litter, according to the SDG Progress Report of 2023, with projections of doubling or tripling each year by 2040. At this rate, by 2050, there will be more plastic in the sea than fish, unless action is taken.

Collaboration on protecting the seas is the need of the hour.

The oceans were the hottest ever in 2022. Given the rising heat graph, this year may be the hottest. A study by Nature found that a huge part of the oceans has changed colour over the past 20 years due to climate change affecting the marine ecosystem. However, international efforts to find a solution to the challenge of protecting and conserving marine biodiversity on the high seas finally delivered a comprehensive legally binding agreement.

The High Seas Treaty also known as the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement was adopted at an intergovernmental conference in New York in June this year after decade-long negotiations. As an instrument of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, it will bring “protection and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction” into the remit of global environmental governance.

This treaty will enhance the ability of UN agencies like UNEP, WMO, etc, to work collaboratively with governments, scientists, industry, and environmentalists to protect and ensure the responsible use of marine environments. It will strengthen conservation arrangements under multilateral environmental agreements and complement the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which includes a pledge to protect 30pc of ocean, land, and coastal areas by 2030. Following the adoption of the Water Action Agenda and the Global Biodiversity Framework last year, the agreement is an important breakthrough by multilateral diplomacy with potential for meaningful contribution towards meeting the SDGs. From the perspective of Pakistan and other coastal developing countries with a stake in sustainable ocean economy, the treaty provides for “capacity building and the transfer of marine technology, including the development and strengthening of institutio­nal capacity and national regulatory frameworks or mechanisms”. It is set to promote “collaboration among regional seas organisations”. The agreement makes environmental impact assessments mandatory before exploration for marine resources is undertaken in areas beyond national jurisdiction, or even within national jurisdiction that may have implications for the high seas.

The treaty aims to achieve its goals by invoking a set of ‘general principles and approaches’, including the ‘polluter-pays’ principle and the ‘precautionary appro­ach’ — two important principles of international environmental frameworks.

In a world facing the disastrous impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and waste, the High Seas Treaty reflects a renewed resolve of the international community to work together to address common challenges. This long-awaited and much-needed step will fill a void in the architecture of international environmental governance and open new vistas for strengthening regional and international collaboration.

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