

Do current conservation plans to protect vital marine ecosystems need to do more?

The ocean is the source and vital sustenance for all life on Earth.

Approximately five per cent of the ocean is protected in some form, with countries collectively moving towards protecting ten per cent by 2020 and 30% by 2030 (MPA News, 2016). Current conservation plans largely focus on the high seas and coastal ecosystems, owing to their size and importance, respectively. Questions, however, remain as to whether we will reach these targets and if they are enough.

The high seas, or waters that are beyond the 200 nautical-mile perimeter of national jurisdiction, constitute almost two-thirds of the ocean and nearly half of the planet. The ‘tragedy of the commons’ highlights the need to protect this ecosystem; competition, common ownership and lack of protective frameworks and enforcement have led to over-exploitation of the ocean and its species.

Currently over 99% of the high seas is unprotected. A treaty that would create legally binding mechanisms for establishing marine protected areas in the high seas is being discussed at the United Nations. While the adoption of an international legal instrument is a lengthy and highly complex process, a new treaty would ultimately provide the strongest framework of enforceability for the conservation of this ecosystem.

However, scientists advise that the global protection target should be closer to 50% (Lubchenco and Grorud-Colvert, 2015; Milman, 2016; O’Leary *et al.*, 2016) and that the high seas should be completely closed to fishing. Others, like Sea Shepherd’s Captain Paul Watson, propose a moratorium on *all* commercial exploitation for 50 years (White and Costello, 2014; Watson, 2018). Such a

measure would allow marine biodiversity to heal and resurge.

Additionally, coral reefs occupy less than one per cent of the ocean (being largely confined to coastal waters) but are home to more than 25% of all marine species. In addition to providing habitat, food, shelter and breeding grounds for marine species, coral reefs also benefit human health and livelihoods. These ecosystems provide medicine, food and jobs for millions of people, while providing protection from weather events and erosion.

Conservation plans can involve the following (Bender *et al.*, 2019):

- regulating human activity through the use of marine protected areas and sanctuaries;
- market-based approaches that incentivize stewardship through coral growing and restoration projects;
- an insurance scheme that allows for a fast response when a reef is damaged by providing the funds necessary for intervention and restoration, such as that for the Mesoamerican Reef.

However, owing to the biological dynamics of coral-reef ecosystems and their sensitivity to water temperature and chemical changes, reducing fossil fuel emissions and stabilizing global rise in temperature at 1.5°C is considered “the only opportunity” to save coral reefs (Heron *et al.*, 2017: 10).

In order to save coral reefs, the high seas, the ocean and their species, local efforts must be supplemented by global efforts, and commercial fishing and greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced. Groups such as Earth Law Center are concerned that current conservation plans adopt the same anthropocentric worldview and framework

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that have driven the decline in ocean health. We must move beyond business-as-usual practices, but also cultivate a new mindset. More can be done, including a fundamental shift in the perception of environmental law, from valuing the ocean as property and a resource, to respecting the inherent and inalienable rights of the ocean to exist, thrive and evolve.

What if instead of focusing on our rights to the ocean, we focus on the rights of the ocean? ■

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Coral reef in Palmyra Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (photo: Jim Maragos/US Fish and Wildlife Service [CC BY 2.0; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>]).

