



An Open Letter from International Scientists on the need for a High Seas Biodiversity Agreement

The international waters of the high seas, and the seabed below¹, include some of the most environmentally important, critically threatened and least protected ecosystems on the planet. Amounting to 64% of the ocean and covering nearly 50% of the surface of the Earth, the high seas provide a range of ecosystem services, from driving weather systems and modulating the climate to the production of a high percentage of the oxygen we breathe – services that are essential to us all. Home to unique deep sea species and ecosystems, and criss-crossed by the migratory corridors of the great ocean wanderers, such as sharks, whales, sea turtles, tunas and seabirds, the high seas are full of life that needs protection.

However, despite their importance, the high seas sit under a fragmented and ineffective management regime, which tends to place short-term economic interests before the long-term health of the oceans. With less than 1% of the high seas under protection, this regime has failed to evolve in response to modern scientific understanding of ocean ecosystems and the increasing impacts on those ecosystems from factors such as overfishing, climate change and ocean acidification. This tiny patchwork system is entirely inadequate to address increases in extractive activities taking place on the high seas enabled by rapid advances in technology.

We, the undersigned scientists, believe that a new high seas biodiversity agreement, based on the precautionary principle and ecosystem approach, is necessary for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the high seas. Such an agreement would provide the mechanism to establish, manage and monitor a global network of MPAs and marine reserves, accelerating the establishment of protected areas in line with existing global commitments. With commercial interests turning increasingly to the high seas, a biodiversity agreement would also provide a framework for the coordination of uses and activities, including effective monitoring, compliance and enforcement. Ensuring conservation and sustainable management of the ocean must be the backbone of a blue economy on which millions of people depend for their well-being and livelihoods.

Recent scientific studies have provided clear evidence of the benefits and critical importance of remote, large-scale marine reserves in the open ocean. Such areas not only preserve fish stocks, and

¹ This letter concerns the international waters that lie beyond any country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the ocean seabed that lies beyond the continental shelf of any country.

protect vulnerable ecosystems, but also provide a baseline for understanding the changes that climate change and human pressures are causing to the ocean as a whole.

Right now there is a special opportunity for the international community to begin negotiations for a High Seas Biodiversity Agreement. At the Rio +20 Summit in June 2012, the world's governments committed to the following:

"address, on an urgent basis, the issue of the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction including by taking a decision on the development of an international instrument under UNCLOS"²

We call on all nations to take these negotiations forward with urgency and determination.

(The scientists who have signed this letter have done so in their personal capacities. Institutional affiliations are provided only for identification purposes and do not imply any institutional position on the governance of the high seas.)

² (para. 162, The Future We Want).