

Strengthening Regional Ocean Governance for the High Seas

Biodiversity in the high seas is threatened, impacting human wellbeing worldwide. The rate of species extinction has reached unprecedented levels. Harm to marine biodiversity in the high seas, those areas that fall outside of national jurisdiction and which cover about half of the planet, is largely caused by intensifying human activities. This includes fishing and other types of marine harvesting, as well as shipping and other activities that contribute to pollution and the degradation of marine ecosystems. In addition, increases in man-made CO₂ emissions have resulted in rising ocean acidity, declining oxygen levels, warming waters and shifting ocean currents. These combined pressures are undermining the health and resilience of marine ecosystems and species around the world and across boundaries. The connectivity between the high seas and coastal waters means that impacts on ecosystems within one also harm the ecological systems of the other.

The existing ocean governance structure, that is the legal, institutional and policy framework established to manage human activities and ensure the conservation and sustainable use of ocean resources, is fragmented rendering it insufficient to address the increasing threats to high seas biodiversity.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) lays down rules governing uses of the ocean and its resources, but does not specify how states should conserve and sustainably use high seas biodiversity. A host of regional and sectoral agreements covering sectors such as fisheries, shipping and others were developed independently both before and after

UNCLOS came into force in 1994, leading to a patchy governance framework. Moreover, there is a lack of coordination and cooperation between the numerous agencies and organisations that have a role or mandate in ocean management both at the regional and global level.

Both a robust international agreement and a strengthened regional governance architecture are needed to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the high seas. A window of opportunity to address the threats to marine biodiversity opened in 2017 when formal negotiations for a new international and legally-binding instrument on marine biodiversity in the high seas were announced by the United Nations General Assembly. For effective implementation, such a global instrument will also depend on improved and well-coordinated action of existing international and regional management bodies covering both sectoral and conservation aspects.

Effective conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the high seas will contribute to a healthy ocean and global wellbeing of current and future generations. Both the Southeast Atlantic and Southeast Pacific regions are characterised by important oceanic currents contributing to high marine productivity. Working through regional organisations, States in these regions have recognised the need to strengthen ocean governance for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, including in the high seas.



Our approach

At the regional level, decision-makers benefit from improved knowledge and understanding about the gaps, challenges and opportunities in the legal and governance framework; current status of, as well as key pressures and threats on biodiversity; the links between high seas biodiversity and human wellbeing; as well as possible options for the management of human activities impacting high seas biodiversity and the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of these management approaches. At the same time, enhanced regional coordination and cooperation between key stakeholders facilitates improved design, implementation and durability of cross-sectoral management approaches. While every region faces specific challenges, an interregional exchange offers valuable learning opportunities and insights relevant for identifying regionally appropriate pathways for improving governance approaches. Strengthened regional governance builds the basis for effective global ocean governance as well as the envisaged new global agreement under UNCLOS and its successful implementation.

In the STRONG High Seas project, we carry out transdisciplinary scientific assessments to provide decision-makers, both in the target regions and globally, with improved knowledge and understanding on high seas biodiversity. We engage with stakeholders from governments, private sector, scientists and civil society to support the design of integrated, cross-sectoral approaches for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the Southeast Atlantic and Southeast Pacific. We then facilitate the timely delivery of these proposed approaches for potential adoption into the relevant regional policy processes. To enable an interregional exchange, we further ensure dialogue with relevant stakeholders in other marine regions. To this end, we set up a regional stakeholder platform to facilitate joint learning and develop a community of practice. Finally, we explore links and opportunities for regional governance in a new international and legally-binding instrument on marine biodiversity in the high seas.

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Regional partners: Secretariat of the Comisión Permanente del Pacífico Sur (CPPS), Secretariat of the Abidjan Convention

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