

The recipients of a 2023 environmental award have called on the United Nations (UN) to ban fishing on the high seas. Ocean fisheries experts Rashid Sumaila and Daniel Pauly have jointly won the **Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement**. They made the plea in **an open letter** ahead of critical UN treaty negotiations on the matter.



*Since the 1950s, catches from the high seas, such as this one, have increased 400% Photo credit: FAO*

## One ocean

There is only one ocean, covering some **70% of the planet**. Different areas of the ocean have regional names, such as the Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific and Indian oceans. Some of this ocean falls under national jurisdictions, meaning countries have authority over it. These are territorial waters. Additionally, coastal nations have territorial rights over a certain amount of the ocean surrounding them, beyond their territorial waters. These are called **Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)**.

A vast amount of the ocean falls beyond territorial waters and EEZs. These are the high seas. They amount to **43% of the planet's surface**. Currently, vast swathes of the high seas are effectively lawless. This allows countries and people to exploit the ocean and its living inhabitants. So, industries like fishing are **plundering these places at a shocking rate**.

Between February 20 and March 3, countries are **negotiating a legally-binding treaty**. It will offer the global human community an opportunity to start acting more responsibly. The treaty aims to provide safeguards for marine life in the high seas. It's **the fifth round of talks** on the conservation and sustainable use of the marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ) treaty.

### **High seas fishing**

Ahead of the latest round of talks, **ocean and fisheries economist Sumaila** and **marine biologist Pauly** published an open letter to the UN. Both experts work at the University of British Columbia.

In their letter, they characterised fishing on the high seas as unprofitable, destructive, and unfair. They argued, for example, that government subsidies are the only thing sustaining fishing in these waters. Broadly speaking, it's rich countries that can afford to provide the hefty subsidies required for fishing vessels to travel far afield for extensive periods of time. Sumaila and Pauly asserted that such vessels mainly lurk in the high seas around Africa, South America and South Asia. They catch fish before they enter the territorial waters in those regions.

In other words, vessels from richer countries are scooping up vast quantities of fish. They do this before these animals can swim towards – and feed – people in poorer countries.

In June 2022, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) **reached a deal to limit fishing subsidies**. Member countries still need to ratify it. However, it fell short of ruling out all subsidies that enable vessels to fish excessively in far-flung locations. It does prohibit subsidies for high seas fishing in areas beyond the authority of regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs). RFMOs are **international organisations** involving groupings of countries. They regulate regional fishing activities on the high seas. So, strictly speaking, the WTO agreement will not prohibit all subsidies for high seas fishing.

### **Call for high seas fishing ban**

In their **open letter**, Sumaila and Pauly call on the UN to rule out commercial high seas fishing entirely. Alongside this, they request that the authority give the high seas protected area status. They also say it must establish an “effective” monitoring force.

The Tyler Prize is administered by the University of Southern California. It chose these two experts as recipients because of the sort of courage illustrated in these demands. The university also gave it to them for their pioneering approaches to assessing the state of ocean biodiversity.

In turn, the two recipients are determined to use the Tyler Prize award to further spread their message about the importance of banning high seas fishing.

Pauly said: “A high seas fishing ban is one of the most effective ways to reverse the damage inflicted on the ocean through decades of unsustainable overfishing, mostly at the hands of wealthy Western countries.”

**Sumaila** also argued: “Banning fishing on the high seas – it’s good for biodiversity, it’s good economically, it’s good for global food security. And it’s good for equity of distribution, because smaller countries benefit when fish come into their catchment area, instead of only China, Korea, Japan, Spain etc., taking all the fish in the high seas.

“There are so many good reasons to do this... before it is too late.”

## BBNJ treaty

The marine experts acknowledge in their letter that calling for a high seas fishing ban is a “big ask”. That is true, as recent UN deliberations – with **some exceptions** – are **not generally characterised** by the promotion or adoption of decidedly progressive action.

The current state of affairs in the high seas is dire. So, agreement on the BBNJ treaty would undoubtedly be a welcome step forward. However, some states have already called for **the exclusion of fish and fisheries** from the scope of the agreement. This illustrates how far some policymakers are from backing meaningful action to protect the ocean.

In principle, UN parties have agreed that the treaty will provide for **the establishment of marine protected areas** (MPAs) in the high seas. However, exactly how **high seas MPAs** will function, and what concrete protections they will provide, is yet to be determined.

Establishing MPAs **does not automatically guarantee protection from exploitation**. So, the detail of the treaty is critical. For instance, the UK authorities permit highly destructive industrial fishing practices in the vast majority of its territorial MPAs.

Greenpeace’s UK political advisor, Megan Randles, highlighted in comments about the country’s role in the UN negotiations: “The UK’s credibility is undeniably weakened by its lack of action to protect MPAs at home. With 92% of UK MPAs still vulnerable to the most destructive fishing methods, it’s time the UK acted like a true global leader and banned industrial fishing from all UK MPAs altogether.”

Greenpeace firmly believes that for the BBNJ treaty to have strength, it needs to provide for the establishment of “fully or highly protected ocean sanctuaries” in the high seas. These must be free from exploitation. This includes freedom from deep-sea mining exploitation, which poses **an imminent threat to ocean ecosystems**.

## The ocean is key to our survival

Both Greenpeace and the Tyler Prize winners point to the 30×30 commitment many countries made at the UN Biodiversity Conference in December 2022 as relevant to the BBNJ talks. This is the pledge that almost 200 countries signed up to at the conference. It would **safeguard 30% of the planet by 2030**.

Sumaila suggested that this pledge was among “good signs of progress” that policymakers are moving towards meaningful action.

Greenpeace Nordic’s oceans campaigner and polar advisor, Dr Laura Meller, also said: “If a strong Treaty is agreed on the 3rd of March, it keeps 30×30 alive.”

What happens in the coming days will determine whether policymakers deliver a robust, fair and ecologically-sound plan for safeguarding the high seas.

If they don’t, they are not only forsaking **the ocean’s lifeforms** but all living creatures – including humans – on land too. That is because, as the UN itself has warned, we all **depend on a healthy ocean for our very survival**.