Debate briefing: Ratification of the Global Ocean Treaty

The UN Global Ocean Treaty, or the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement, is one of the most significant steps forward in international conservation in human history. Once it enters into force, the Treaty will enable countries to work together to create a network of ocean sanctuaries spanning the high seas - the vast expanses of the ocean that lie beyond national boundaries. This is currently the world's only pathway to meet the global 30x30 goal of protecting at least 30% of the world's ocean before 2030.

The UK was one of the first countries to sign the Global Ocean Treaty when it opened for signatures at the UN last year. But since then, progress has stalled and the government has delayed introducing the legislation needed to ratify the Treaty until after the election.

Labour must push the government to prioritise global ocean protection by bringing forward legislation needed to ratify the Treaty before the election.

A future Labour government should also commit to:

1. **Introduce the legislation needed to ratify the Global Ocean Treaty in its first 100 days.** By swiftly ratifying the Global Ocean Treaty, a Labour government can lead the way on global ocean protection on the world stage. This will send a strong signal to the global community that the UK under a Labour government takes its commitments to climate change, biodiversity and global ocean protection seriously.

2. **Put the UK at the forefront of championing new high seas ocean sanctuary proposals, for example, in the Sargasso Sea.** If we are to meet the goal of protecting at least 30% of the world's ocean by 2030, the work to identify and collaborate on proposals for ocean sanctuaries must begin immediately. A future Labour government must work in collaboration with allies around the world to begin developing proposals for marine protected areas, ready to present at the Treaty's first Conference of the Parties (COP1) which will take place within one year of the Treaty coming into force. The Sargasso Sea has been identified as a priority site to protect under the new Treaty and the UK is well-placed to spearhead this proposal.

Why do we need global ocean sanctuaries?

The ocean plays a vital role in regulating our climate, supporting marine biodiversity, and providing food and livelihoods for billions of people. However, the world's oceans face extreme and growing threats from human activity, from pollution to overfishing and climate change. And currently, less than 1% of the high seas are fully protected.

Ocean sanctuaries are like national parks at sea. By putting limits on destructive activity, like industrial fishing, drilling and mining, they give marine life a chance to recover and thrive. Healthy oceans with diverse ecosystems are more resilient to environmental stressors such as climate change, pollution, and overfishing. By protecting these areas, we can mitigate the impacts of these destructive threats and allow marine ecosystems to recover. Ocean sanctuaries also help to reduce the impact of climate change by preserving critical habitats like mangroves, seagrass beds, and coral reefs, which act as carbon sinks. Protecting these vast stores of blue carbon is critical in slowing climate change.

Which sites should be prioritised for protection once the Global Ocean Treaty comes into force?

Greenpeace and the High Seas Alliance have already started to identify high seas sites that should be prioritised for protection under the Treaty, including the Sargasso Sea, Emperor Seamounts and the South Tasman Sea. Many of these priority sites surround UK overseas territories, which already play an important role in championing marine protection. Bermuda, for example, sits in the middle of the Sargasso Sea and is a champion for its protection. Last month, Bermuda's Deputy Premier called for the Sargasso Sea to be prioritised for protection under the new Treaty. A Labour government can demonstrate to the international community that it takes its responsibility to tackling the interconnected climate and nature emergencies seriously by committing to develop proposals for high seas ocean sanctuaries, ready to present at the Treaty's first COP.

The Sargasso Sea

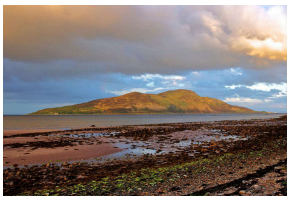
Jacks take shelter under

The Sargasso Sea, nicknamed the "golden floating rainforest", is home to a rich range of species, and acts as a huge carbon store for the planet. The floating Sargassum mats, which give the sea its name, are home to more than 145 invertebrate species and more than 127 species of fish. But this uniquely biodiverse part of the Atlantic Ocean is at

sargassum seaweed in the Sargasso Sea (Greenpeace, 2019).	risk of overfishing, pollution and shipping traffic. Given that the UK government is a proactive member of the Sargasso Sea Commission, which facilitates voluntary collaboration for the conservation of the Sargasso Sea, it is well placed to work with other countries in the region to spearhead an ocean sanctuary proposal here.

Examples of ocean sanctuaries across the world

Lamlash Bay, Scotland



The view across Lamlash Bay in Arran, Mike Peel

The community in Lamlash Bay fought for over ten years for a marine protected area in Lamlash Bay, on the island of Arran. The 'no take zone' was established in 2008 and has been a huge success.

Just over one square mile in size, Lamlash Bay protects fragile maerl beds. These slow-growing coralline algae can take over 100 years to form and serve as important carbon stores. They are also extremely sensitive to damage and disruption.

In 2020, research by the University of York found that king scallop density in the MPA was four times higher than in 2013, and that carbon absorbing weeds have returned to the seabed.

Cabo Pulmo, Mexico

Cabo Pulmo ocean sanctuary, Octavio Aburto

Cabo Pulmo was declared a marine protected area under Mexican law in 1995. Since then, numbers of fish have increased by more than 400% and Cabo Pulmo now thrives like a reef that has never been fished in.

Likewise, migratory species such as whale sharks, giant mantas, humpback whales, marine turtles and sharks have returned to the area. The recovery of this amazing reef is a success story: in part due to the legal protections passed but also due to the collaboration of nearby communities, who even voluntarily stopped their own fishing activities to support the protection of the unique Cabo Pulmo ecosystem.

Galápagos Marine Reserve, Ecuador

Hammerhead shark swimming among fish in the Galapagos Marine Reserve (Greenpeace, 2024).

The Galápagos Marine Reserve is one of the best examples of ocean protection in action and protects one of the planet's most unique ecosystems. This sanctuary includes a tremendous variety of habitats, from coral reefs to mangrove swamps, where trees grow directly in salty seawater. It covers an area larger than the size of England (around 133,000 square km) making it the second largest marine reserve in the world.

Established in 1998 by the Ecuadorian government, it is now teeming with marine life and home to 3,000 different plant and animal species, from unusual species like the marine iguana, the world's only seagoing lizard, to scalloped hammerhead sharks and green turtles.

Appendix: What will the Global Ocean Treaty do?

The Global Ocean Treaty has four main provisions:

1. **The creation of ocean sanctuaries in the high seas:** The Treaty sets out a legal framework and clear process for establishing marine protected areas in the high seas . This is the world's only pathway to meeting the global goal of protecting at least 30% of the world's ocean by 2030.

2. **A framework for environmental impact assessments:** The Treaty will give the international community more transparency and a greater say in decisions regarding activities that could harm global ocean biodiversity. With the right political will, this will contribute importantly to preventing destructive activities, such as oil drilling and mining, from being undertaken in the high seas.

3. **The fair and equitable sharing of marine genetic resources (MGRs):** MGRs are the genetic material of any plant, animal or microbe. Most of the ocean's biodiversity, including genetic diversity, remains unstudied, but holds great opportunities for economies, science, and conservation. For example, marine organisms are being collected and utilised to develop pharmaceutical and cosmetic products. This Treaty contains obligations to share both the monetary and non-monetary benefits – for example, access to samples and increased scientific cooperation – of MGRs collected in the high seas. This

ensures that scientific discoveries in the high seas are shared for the benefit of all humankind, not just a handful of governments and corporations.

4. **Capacity building and technology transfer:** The Treaty makes provisions to develop marine scientific and technological capacity, in particular that of developing countries, to promote cooperation and the sharing of knowledge between states. The Treaty will create a funding pot to support developing countries in this regard.