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A Win for the Oceans: International Sustainability Agreement

Gemma Alexander Feb 18, 2021



“Fourteen heads of state call in to a remote meeting” sounds like a post-COVID adaptation of a “walks into a bar” joke. But it was actually the beginning of what might be the first-ever international agreement reached online. The culmination of two year’s work, the agreement would have been a major accomplishment even without the challenges of a pandemic obstructing the process. And it marks a major win for the oceans. It is nothing less than 14 coastal nations making the commitment to manage their national ocean waters 100% sustainably.

The Ocean Panel

Major environmental initiatives usually involve the U.S. and a handful of other major economies throwing their weight around, making demands of smaller nations without committing to much of anything themselves. But the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy ([Ocean Panel \(https://oceanpanel.org/\)](https://oceanpanel.org/)) is a unique initiative in two ways. First, the biggest economies were not even invited. Instead, 14 smaller coastal nations united to take definitive action informed by science. Australia, Canada, Chile, Fiji, Ghana, Indonesia, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Namibia, Norway, Palau, and Portugal, supported by the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean formed the Ocean Panel in 2018.

The second unique feature was that the Panel comprised the heads of state for each of the 14 nations, rather than lower-level bureaucrats. So the participants themselves had the authority to approve the agreement they helped to define. As a result, there was no need to wait years for the agreement to work its way through the bureaucratic processes of the member nations before taking effect.

Even without the presence of world powers like the U.S., China, and Russia, the coalition of 14 nations accounts for nearly 40% of the world's coastlines, 30% of the world's exclusive economic zones (EEZs), 20% of the world's fisheries, and 20% of the world's shipping fleet. The agreement affects an area of ocean roughly the size of Africa.

The Process

The Ocean Panel commissioned a group of 250 experts to provide the latest science and identify sustainable ocean management practices. They formed an advisory network of more than 135 private sector, NGO, and intergovernmental stakeholders across 35 countries. The network developed strategies for action and formed coalitions to enact change across the many sectors that have an impact on ocean management.

In two years, the process produced 19 peer-reviewed papers that informed 14 meetings amongst the countries. In December 2020, the Ocean Panel released the twentieth, and final report. The final agreement was reached through a completely remote process in response to the global pandemic.

Towards a Sustainable Ocean Economy



The Agreement

That report, [Ocean Solutions that Benefit People, Nature and the Economy](https://oceanpanel.org/ocean-action/files/full-report-ocean-solutions-eng.pdf) (<https://oceanpanel.org/ocean-action/files/full-report-ocean-solutions-eng.pdf>), sets forth a set of pragmatic priorities for transforming the way nations use the ocean and it defines the practices required for sustainable ocean management. The 14 leaders who make up the Ocean Panel [agreed to the sustainable management](https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/environment-and-conservation/2020/12/in-rare-show-of-solidarity-14-key-nations-commit-to-protect) (<https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/environment-and-conservation/2020/12/in-rare-show-of-solidarity-14-key-nations-commit-to-protect>) practices described in the report. That means that they will sustainably manage 100% of the oceans under their national jurisdictions by 2025. And each of the 14 nations will set aside 30% of the seas as marine protected areas by 2030.

30 By 30

The commitment to set aside 30% of the participating nations' seas as marine protected areas by 2030 complies with the United Nations' call for action known as "30 by 30." The name is shorthand for a [draft plan](https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/efb0/1f84/a892b98d2982a829962b6371/wg2020-02-03-en.pdf) (<https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/efb0/1f84/a892b98d2982a829962b6371/wg2020-02-03-en.pdf>) to address climate change released in early 2020 by the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. It recommends protecting 30% of lands and oceans worldwide by the end of the decade; conserving at least 10% of the planet under strict protection; and reducing nutrient and plastic pollution by at least half. The plan was to have been considered at the UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15 (<http://sdg.iisd.org/events/2020-un-biodiversity-conference/>)) in China last October. Due

to COVID-19, that conference was rescheduled for May 2021.

What You Can Do

Ocean conservation is a global issue, but everyone can take local action. (<https://earth911.com/inspire/how-you-can-help-protect-our-oceans/>) Most of the steps individuals can take to protect the oceans are available even for people who live far inland. You can contact your representatives and let them know you support the management principles produced by the Ocean Panel. While you're at it, also let them know you support the U.S. joining international ocean sustainability agreements. You can sign the global petition to support 30 by 30 (https://www.campaignfornature.org/petition/?SQF_WOD=%3Cworldoceansday%3E) that will be presented to world leaders at the CBD COP 15 conference.

To improve your own direct impact, choose to eat sustainable seafood (<https://earth911.com/how-and-buy/good-better-best-seafood/>). Prevent and pick up cigarettes (<https://earth911.com/business-policy/cigarette-butts-ocean/>) and other litter that makes its way to the sea. And perhaps most importantly, learn how to reduce plastic pollution (<https://earth911.com/eco-tech/stop-plastic-pollution/>) and move closer to living plastic-free (<https://earth911.com/home-garden/plastic-free-home-5-simple-changes/>) in your own home.

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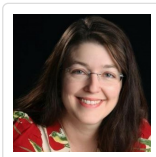
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Gemma Alexander (<https://earth911.com/author/galexander/>)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing here (<https://gemmadeealexander.com/>).

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