

World's nations gather to rescue ocean life

It took a decade to get to the negotiating table, and it could easily take another to finish the job, but UN talks in New York to safeguard life in the high seas finally begin in earnest on Monday, March 28th.

The stakes could hardly be higher, experts and diplomats agree.

Oceans produce half the oxygen we breathe, regulate the weather, and provide humanity's single largest source of protein.

Without them, Earth would be just another barren rock in the Universe.

And yet humanity has harvested marine species upon which we depend to the edge of extinction, and used the seas as a collective garbage dump.

Climate change, meanwhile, has altered the ocean's basic chemistry in ways that raise the spectre of a mass extinction that scientists say is already underway.

Today, a patchwork of agreements and regulatory bodies govern shipping, fishing, and mineral extraction, while the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, negotiated in the 1970s, lays out rules for how far a nation's zone of influence extends beyond its shores.

But in what may be the biggest legal loophole in history, geographically speaking, there is no international treaty protecting marine areas beyond national jurisdiction – that's two-thirds of the surface of the oceans, and half the planet's.

The result has been a kind of aquatic "Far West", a case study for what has sometimes been called the tragedy of the commons.

"Very early we decided that the high seas were for everybody and

nobody, because everyone owns them and nobody takes responsibility for them," said Callum Roberts, a marine biologist at the University of York.

For most of human history, the vast expanse of open ocean was seen as a distance to travel across rather than a resource to exploit.

But a global population closing in on 10 billion, along with lethally efficient advances in technology, have created the will and the way to pillage marine flora and fauna as never before.

Currently, about 12 per cent of the 90 million tonnes of fish harvested every year come from the high seas, but that percentage could climb quickly.

"On the high seas, anything goes," said a European diplomat who will take part in the talks.

"The aim of this future agreement is precisely to set up a system of governance to constrain the impact of human activity," he said, requesting anonymity.

The meeting on Monday of the "preparatory committee" is the first of four two-week sessions scheduled through to the end of 2017.

That is when members of the United Nations will decide if they have a foundation for negotiating a legally binding treaty which could – if the history of UN climate talks is any guide – take a long time.

As with the two-decade wrangle over how to tackle global warming, which finally yielded a universal deal in December, a half-dozen key issues divide nations grouped in familiar

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UN talks in New York to safeguard ocean life in the high seas began on Monday while on Tuesday aerial surveys of Australia's Great Barrier Reef revealed the worst bleaching on record, say scientists

Bank of England issues new Brexit warning

Uncertainty surrounding Britain's looming referendum on European Union membership could send the pound slumping further and boost financing costs, the Bank of England warned on March 29th.

The central bank's Financial Policy Committee (FPC) declared that the risks surrounding the vote represented "the most significant near-term domestic risks to financial stability", echoing recent comments from BoE governor Mark Carney.

Britons are set to vote in a crucial referendum on June 23rd to decide whether to back a so-called Brexit – or exit from the European Union.

Uncertainty over the outcome could spark a "further depreciation" in sterling, the FPC warned in minutes from its March meeting, adding it could also adversely affect "the cost and availability of financing for a broad range of UK borrowers".

In late February, the pound had tumbled to a near seven-year low against the dollar on mounting fears that Britain could leave the 28-member EU bloc.

The FPC cautioned on Tuesday that the nation's potential EU withdrawal could "spill over" into the eurozone – and weigh on the currency bloc's growth prospects.

It added that the outlook for Britain's financial stability had "deteriorated" since its previous meeting in November, citing increasing global economic risks and the threat of Brexit.

However, the FPC noted Britain's major banks had passed stress tests designed to show their ability to survive a severe economic shock, such as a sharp drop in sterling or a prolonged recession.

Earlier this month, the Bank of England announced it would make extra cash available to banks around the time of the referendum, in order to help overcome market turbulence and the risk of another credit crunch.

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Japan's latest whale kill draws criticism

Japanese whalers last week killed 333 whales for what they claim to be scientific research. Opponents say this is a front for illegal commercial whaling & ignores international law

CHARLOTTE CUTHBERTSON

Japanese whalers last week brought back 333 whales from their "scientific research" expedition in Antarctic waters – their first since an international court ruling that deemed their annual Antarctic whaling programme illegal.

Japan defied the ruling and sent out four ships on December 1st, 2015, saying they needed to kill whales to gain important scientific data.

Of the 333 minke whales killed, 230 were females – of which 209 were pregnant – and 103 were males, according to Japan's Fisheries Agency.

Scientific research is exempt from a 1986 international ban on commercial whaling. But opponents of Japan's Antarctic hunt say "scientific research" is a cover for commercial whaling, since the surplus meat is sold – much of it ending up in supermarkets and restaurants.

Japan's actual catch has fallen in recent years, in part because of declining domestic demand for whale meat. The government has spent large amounts of tax money to sustain the whaling operations.

Conservation group Sea Shepherd, which has had at-sea battles with Japanese whaling ships in previous years, condemned the hunt.

"This is the same pattern we've seen for years: Japan simply ignores international law and international opinion, and continues to slaughter whales with impunity, selling their flesh for a profit," said founder adviser Paul Watson in a Facebook post.

The organisation's managing director in Australia, Jeff Hansen, criticised the Australian and New Zealand governments for not intervening.

"The majority of Australians wanted the Australian government to send a vessel to oppose the slaughter. They did not. Sea



A Japanese whaling fleet returned to its home port of Shimonoseki in western Japan on March 24th from a whale hunt in the Antarctic after a one-year pause, media reported, a trip that angered environmentalists and nations opposed to the slaughter

Shepherd requested that the Australian government release the location of the whalers. They refused. Instead, the governments responsible for protecting these magnificent creatures stood by, in the complete knowledge that both federal and international crimes were taking place."

Australia and New Zealand have previously been outspoken opponents of Japan's whaling practices, with Australia introducing the international court case that culminated in Japan being ordered to stop its illegal whaling.

Sea Shepherd itself was unable

to send a ship to try and disrupt the whaling owing to difficulty in tracking the whalers and lack of a boat swift enough. However, Hansen said the organisation will soon have a fast, long-range ship.

Norway and Iceland both kill more whales than Japan;

together the three countries kill around 2,000 per year.

According to the International Whaling Commission (IWC), Antarctic minke whales have been protected since the 1986 moratorium, apart from some special permit catches.

"There are several hundred thousand Antarctic minke whales and thus they are clearly not endangered. However, there has been an appreciable decline in their estimated abundance," the IWC website states.

IWC currently estimates the Antarctic Minke whale population to total around 460,000 to 690,000.

Japan carries out whaling ostensibly as "scientific whaling", but the International Court of Justice (ICJ) determined its Antarctic whaling was commercial and therefore illegal under the moratorium.

Norway has an objection to the IWC moratorium and has also used scientific permits to boost its whaling, according to the Whale and Dolphin Conservation group (WDC).

Iceland has continued to kill whales despite the IWC moratorium on commercial whaling. It uses loopholes in the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), and its illegal move to take a so-called "reservation" in 2002.



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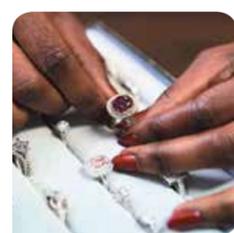
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