



## Protecting World Oceans

This editorial is based on [“A treaty to protect world oceans will serve everyone well”](#) which was published in Livemint on 12/03/2023. It discusses the needs to protect the world's oceans and steps that should be taken.

**For Prelims:** United Nations, High Seas Treaty, Climate change, Greenhouse Gases, Fossil Fuels, Food and Agriculture Organization, Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, IPCC, UNCLOS, Marine Protected Areas

**For Mains:** Water Resources, Protecting World Oceans and related challenges,

Recently, the [UN \(United Nations\)](#) members agreed on a [High Seas Treaty](#) to ensure the protection and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction.

It was agreed during talks led by the UN during the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on Marine [Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction \(BBNJ\)](#) in New York, the US.

The treaty is yet to be formally adopted as members are yet to ratify it. Once adopted, the treaty will be legally binding.

The ocean is a huge carbon sink, but that status is increasingly threatened. A healthy ocean ecosystem plays an important role in the carbon cycle. It is therefore time to provide the ocean with the protection it deserves.

### What is the Need to Protect Oceans?

- **Supports the Livelihoods:**
  - The ocean is a **crucial ecosystem that supports the livelihoods of three billion people** and provides economic security.
    - 3 billion people depend on its ecosystems for food and economic security.
- **Mitigates Climate Change:**
  - It also mitigates [climate change](#), having absorbed **93% of the heat trapped by greenhouse gases** and about 30% of the CO<sub>2</sub> emitted by burning [fossil fuels](#) so far.
- **Maintaining Carbon Cycle:**
  - A healthy ocean ecosystem, with abundant marine biodiversity, **plays an important role in the carbon cycle and helps maintain critical ecosystem services** such as carbon sequestration and oxygen production.
- **Economic Importance:**
  - Oceans are **important for the global economy, providing food, energy, and other resources**.
    - According to the [United Nations](#), the global fishing industry employs over 50

million people and provides food for billions more.

- Additionally, ocean-based industries such as shipping, tourism, and renewable energy are growing rapidly.

## What are the Challenges in Ocean Protection?

### ▪ IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregular) Fishing:

- Overfishing is one of the biggest threats to the health of the world's oceans. It can lead to the depletion of fish stocks and disrupt entire marine ecosystems.
  - According to the [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#), **approximately 33% of global fish stocks are overfished**, and another 60% are fully exploited. Additionally, **Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing** is estimated to cost the global economy up to USD23.5 billion annually.

### ▪ Climate Change:

- **Climate change is causing ocean temperatures to rise and ocean acidity to increase**, which can harm marine life and coral reefs. It can also lead to the loss of habitats and changes in ocean currents.
  - The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) reports that the oceans have absorbed over 90% of the excess heat trapped by greenhouse gases since the 1970s, leading to a rise in ocean temperatures.
  - Additionally, the oceans have absorbed approximately 30% of the carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere, leading to increased ocean acidity.

### ▪ Pollution:

- **Pollution is a significant threat to the health of world oceans.** It can include plastic waste, oil spills, agricultural runoff, and chemicals. Polluted water can harm marine life and create **dead zones** where nothing can survive.

### ▪ Unsustainable Tourism:

- Tourism can have a significant impact on the health of world oceans, especially in areas where there is high demand for activities such as snorkeling, diving, and beach visits. If not managed properly, tourism can lead to habitat destruction, pollution, and overfishing.
  - According to the [World Tourism Organization \(UNWTO\)](#), international tourist arrivals reached 1.4 billion in 2018, with coastal and marine tourism being a significant contributor. However, unsustainable tourism practices can lead to environmental degradation, including habitat destruction, pollution, and overfishing.

### ▪ Invasive Species:

- Invasive species can **disrupt the balance of marine ecosystems and harm native species**. They can be introduced through ballast water from ships, or accidental release from aquaculture or aquariums.
  - The [International Union for Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#) estimates that **invasive species are responsible for 18% of global fish extinctions**.

### ▪ Lack of Governance:

- The **management and protection of world oceans can be challenging due to the lack of governance and cooperation between countries**. Many areas of the ocean are considered international waters, which makes it difficult to enforce regulations and protect marine ecosystems.
  - According to the United Nations, **only 16%** of the world's oceans are covered by marine protected areas (MPAs), and only a fraction of these is fully protected from fishing and other extractive activities.
  - Additionally, there is a lack of international cooperation and coordination in the management and protection of the high seas, which cover 64% of the world's oceans.

## What should be done to Protect World Oceans?

### ▪ Establish and Enforce Marine Protected Areas (MPAs):

- MPAs can **help protect marine ecosystems by limiting fishing and other extractive activities**. They can also provide a sanctuary for endangered species and promote biodiversity. Governments and international organizations should work together to

establish and enforce more MPAs, especially in areas of high biodiversity and vulnerability.

- A 2017 study showed that **marine reserves in national waters have on average 670% more fish**, as measured by biomass, than adjacent unprotected areas.

▪ **Reduce Plastic Pollution:**

- Governments can implement policies that encourage the use of reusable or biodegradable alternatives, and the private sector can take steps to reduce the use of [single-use plastics](#).

▪ **Combat Climate Change:**

- Governments can implement policies that encourage renewable energy and low-carbon transportation. The private sector can also invest in green technologies and practices. Individuals can reduce their carbon footprint by using energy-efficient appliances and reducing their reliance on fossil fuels.

▪ **Regulate Fishing:**

- To combat overfishing, governments should implement policies that limit fishing quotas and establish sustainable fishing practices. The private sector can also take steps to promote sustainable fishing practices, such as using selective fishing gear and avoiding bycatch.

▪ **Combat Illegal Fishing:**

- Governments **should implement measures to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing**, such as monitoring and surveillance of fishing activities, and imposing stricter penalties for violations.

▪ **Increase International Cooperation:**

- Protecting world oceans requires international cooperation and coordination. Governments should work together to establish and enforce international agreements and regulations, such as the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#).
- The private sector and civil society can also play a role in promoting international cooperation and advocating for stronger protection measures.

**Drishti Mains Question**

What are the key challenges in conserving the world's oceans and how can they be effectively addressed to ensure the sustainable use and protection of this vital global resource?

**UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)**

**Prelims**

**Q. With reference to the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea, consider the following statements:**

1. A coastal state has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles, measured from baseline determined in accordance with the convention.
2. Ships of all states, whether coastal or land-locked, enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea.
3. The Exclusive Economic Zone shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured.

**Which of the statements given above are correct?**

- (a) 1 and 2 only  
(b) 2 and 3 only  
(c) 1 and 3 only  
(d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (d)**

**Exp:**

- Under limits of the territorial sea every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles, measured from baselines determined in accordance with this Convention. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- Under INNOCENT PASSAGE IN THE TERRITORIAL SEA, Subject to this Convention, ships of all States, whether coastal or land-locked, enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
- The exclusive economic zone is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established in this Part, under which the rights and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of this Convention. Under this the exclusive economic zone shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured. **Hence, statement 3 is correct.**

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### **Mains**

**Q.** With respect to the South China sea, maritime territorial disputes and rising tension affirm the need for safeguarding maritime security to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region. In this context, discuss the bilateral issues between India and China. **(2018)**

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