NO PREP

Global Ocean Treaties and the Future of Marine Protection

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

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The health of the world's oceans depends not only on local conservation projects but also on international cooperation. Oceans do not follow political boundaries; currents, migrating species, and pollution move freely across borders. To protect these shared waters, nations have developed global ocean treaties, agreements that set rules for how humans can use and safeguard the seas. These treaties reflect both the successes and challenges of uniting countries around a common cause: protecting the planet's largest ecosystem.

Overview of International Treaties

One of the most important frameworks is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), often described as the "constitution of the oceans." It defines countries' rights to marine resources, territorial waters, and responsibilities for conservation. Other treaties focus on more specific issues. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) includes marine ecosystems in its goals, while the International Whaling Commission (IWC) regulates whaling to prevent overexploitation. In recent years, new agreements have emerged to address plastic pollution, high-seas conservation, and climate-related threats to oceans.

Successes and Challenges of Global Cooperation

Treaties have had many successes, such as reducing whaling, creating marine sanctuaries in Antarctica, and promoting international research. However, enforcement is difficult. Many treaties depend on countries voluntarily following rules, and not all governments have the resources or political will to comply. Conflicts often arise between conservation goals and economic interests like shipping, fishing, and oil exploration. In addition, global problems such as climate change require action beyond traditional conservation measures, making treaty negotiations more complex.

The Role of Nations and Communities

While treaties are negotiated by governments, local communities, nonprofits, and even students play a vital role in shaping their outcomes. Public pressure can push governments to adopt stronger protections, and grassroots campaigns often influence international negotiations. Citizens can participate by supporting sustainable seafood, reducing plastic use, or raising awareness about conservation. In this way, treaties are not just abstract legal documents but living agreements that rely on human action and responsibility.

Looking to the Future

The future of marine protection will depend on how well nations can adapt treaties to new challenges. Climate change, ocean acidification, and deep-sea mining are emerging issues that require urgent attention. Some experts call for a Global Ocean Authority, an organization with greater power to enforce conservation rules across borders. Others argue that empowering local communities and increasing funding for enforcement may be more practical. What is clear is that the oceans cannot wait — the next generation must be ready to carry forward the work of protecting our blue planet.

Key Information: Table: Examples of Global Ocean Treaties

Treaty/Agreement	Focus	Key Achievement
UNCLOS	Territorial waters, resource rights	Defined nations' legal ocean zones
International Whaling Comm.	Whaling regulation	Reduced large-scale commercial whaling
Antarctic Treaty	Antarctic conservation	Protected Antarctica from resource exploitation
Paris Accord	Climate policy, oceans included	Linked carbon reduction to ocean health
High Seas Treaty (BBNJ)	Biodiversity in international waters	Created framework for high-seas protection

Case Study: The High Seas Treaty (BBNJ Agreement)

In 2023, after nearly two decades of negotiations, nations finally agreed on a treaty to protect biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), often called the "High Seas Treaty." This treaty establishes a framework for creating marine protected areas on the high seas — areas outside any single country's control. It also sets rules for sharing benefits from marine genetic resources and requires environmental impact assessments for activities that could harm marine ecosystems. The agreement marks a historic step forward. It reached the 60 ratifications it needed in September 2025 and entered into force on 17 January 2026, but challenges remain in enforcement and in ensuring equitable participation by both wealthy and developing nations. The treaty shows both the potential of global cooperation and the difficulties of reaching consensus among nearly 200 countries.

1. What are two major goals of the High Seas Treaty?

_____

_____

2. Why might enforcing the treaty be difficult even now that it is in force?

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. What is UNCLOS often called?

    a) The Marine Rights Act

    b) The Constitution of the Oceans

    c) The Blue Planet Accord

    d) The Global Ocean Protection Plan

2. What was a key achievement of the International Whaling Commission?

a) Expanding the territorial waters of nations

b) Regulating oil drilling

c) Reducing large-scale commercial whaling

d) Creating the Paris Accord

3. Why are global treaties sometimes difficult to enforce?

a) Marine resources never cross borders

b) Oceans are privately owned

c) All nations have equal enforcement capacity

d) Countries often must voluntarily comply

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Protects biodiversity on the high seas	A) Paris Accord
2. ___ Regulates whaling practices	B) UNCLOS
3. ___ Defines nations' rights to marine resources	C) Antarctic Treaty
4. ___ Protects Antarctica from exploitation	D) High Seas Treaty (BBNJ)
5. ___ Links carbon reduction to ocean health	E) International Whaling Commission

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Paris Accord links global _____ reduction to ocean health.

2. The High Seas Treaty requires environmental _____ assessments for risky activities.

3. Many treaties rely on countries' voluntary _____ to succeed.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How can grassroots campaigns influence international treaties?

2. What are two emerging challenges that future treaties must address?

3. Why do experts call the High Seas Treaty a "historic step"?