

8. High Sea Treaty – Environment

BBNJ treaty receives 60 ratifications, will enter into force to protect marine life in international waters in January 2026. The BBNJ Treaty (or High Seas Treaty) is the first legally binding international law to protect marine biodiversity in areas beyond national control, covering over two-thirds of the ocean. Having now reached the required 60 ratifications, it will enter into force in 2026, establishing rules for marine protected areas and the equitable sharing of marine genetic resources.

The BBNJ Treaty – A Landmark Agreement for the High Seas

The Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty, also known as the High Seas Treaty, is a historic international agreement focused on the conservation and sustainable use of marine life in the vast ocean areas that lie beyond any single country's control.

BBNJ Treaty

Full Name – Its official title is the Treaty on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction.

Core Focus – The treaty establishes a legal framework for governing the high seas. These are the parts of the ocean that lie beyond the 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of coastal states.

Legal Foundation – It is a legally binding instrument developed under the umbrella of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS, adopted in 1982, is often called the "constitution for the oceans" as it provides the comprehensive framework for all ocean governance.

Recent Milestone – Entry into Force

The treaty has achieved a critical milestone, ensuring it will soon become international law.

Ratification Threshold Reached – The treaty required 60 countries to formally ratify it to come into effect. This threshold has now been met.

Entry into Force Date – The BBNJ Treaty is set to officially enter into force on January 17, 2026, which is 120 days after the 60th ratification was deposited.

Recent Ratifications – The final push to reach the threshold in September 2025 included ratifications from countries like Sri Lanka, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Sierra Leone, and Morocco.

Global Intent – A total of 143 countries, including India, have signed the treaty. A signature indicates a country's intent to ratify and be bound by the agreement in the future.

Core Objectives of the Treaty

The BBNJ Treaty is built on four key pillars designed to ensure a holistic approach to managing the high seas.

Pillar	Objective	Details and Importance
Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)	To establish and manage a network of large-scale protected areas in the high seas.	This aims to significantly increase ocean protection. Currently, only 6.35% of the ocean is protected, and a mere 1.89% is designated as strict 'no-take' MPAs where activities like fishing, mining, and drilling are banned.
Marine Genetic Resources (MGRs)	To ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from the genetic resources of the high seas.	MGRs are materials from marine plants, animals, and microbes that have vast potential for use in medicine, pharmaceuticals, and other industries. The treaty ensures these benefits are shared globally, not just by nations with the technology to exploit them.
Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)	To mandate legally-binding assessments for activities that could harm the high seas environment.	This requires countries and corporations to rigorously evaluate the potential ecological impacts of activities like deep-sea mining, carbon sequestration projects, and large-scale fishing before they are allowed to proceed.
Capacity Building & Tech Transfer	To assist developing nations in participating and	This pillar focuses on providing financial resources, scientific knowledge, and technology to developing coun-

	implementing the treaty effectively.	tries, ensuring they can meet their conservation obligations and benefit from the sustainable use of marine resources.
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Governance and Future Implementation

With the treaty set to enter into force, the focus now shifts to its operationalization.

Preparatory Commission (PrepCom) Meetings – These meetings are currently underway to develop the detailed rules, regulations, and procedures for the treaty's implementation. Key focus areas include finalizing governance structures, establishing a Clearing-House Mechanism for sharing scientific and technical information, and setting up equitable funding mechanisms.

First Conference of Parties (COP1) – The first official meeting of all the countries that have ratified the treaty (the 'Parties') will be held after it enters into force. COP1 will be a crucial event where the rules developed by the PrepCom will be formally adopted and the treaty's provisions will be operationalized.

Global Significance and Relevance

The BBNJ Treaty is a monumental achievement for international environmental law and global cooperation.

Vast Coverage – It provides a governance framework for the high seas, which cover over 70% of the planet's surface and are home to immense biodiversity.

A Win for Multilateralism – It demonstrates successful multilateral cooperation on managing a global commons—a resource that belongs to all of humanity.

Sustainable Management – The treaty promotes a balanced approach to the sustainable management of ocean resources, integrating conservation needs with equitable access and use.

Political Momentum – The successful ratification signals a growing international commitment to marine biodiversity protection, especially ahead of high-level meetings at the UN General Assembly.

Source – <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/water/bbnj-treaty-receives-60-ratifications-will-enter-into-force-to-protect-marine-life-in-international-waters-in-january-2026>

