

MEDIA BRIEFING: Corporate interference in ocean governance must end

Ocean Treaty talks set to resume

The next round of Ocean Treaty talks, the Third Preparatory Commission (Prepcom 3), will begin at the United Nations in New York on 23 March. They are extremely important as key decisions will be made on how the first Ocean COP can deliver the protection desperately needed to allow the ocean to recover from decades of destruction. But Greenpeace is warning that governments must not allow vested interests of industrial fishing corporations to block or derail progress.

Ocean governance is a murky world

The high seas have long been regarded as the “wild west” because there was no legal framework to protect it before the Ocean Treaty was won and [came into force](#) earlier this year. This meant industrial fishing companies have been able to pillage the sea beyond countries’ national jurisdictions with near complete impunity, destroying biodiversity, endangering many species, as well as killing [millions](#) of whales, dolphins and turtles with their indiscriminate nets. For decades the governance of the high seas has been a murky world of backroom deals, meetings that often aren’t properly recorded and agreements made in secret. The ocean that belongs to all of us is being traded away behind closed doors, but one significant development gives us the chance to curb the power of the fishing industry: the Global Ocean Treaty.

Marine life is governed by the industry that destroys it

The organisations managing industrial fishing - one of the most destructive human activities with the biggest impact on marine biodiversity - are heavily focused on the management of fish as a commodity. So it's no surprise that they have presided over [decades of destruction](#) and decimation of biodiversity while the fishing industry rakes in billions every year. These opaque and shadowy organisations are called [Regional Fisheries Management Organisations](#) (RFMOs), and they are majority made up of government representatives that have a vested interest in commercial fishing.

The fishing industry is so deeply embedded within these organisations and industry interests, particularly from large-scale, distant-water fishing nations, heavily influence quota allocations, and management measures, whilst ignoring scientific advice which leads to a systemic prioritisation of industry profits above all else. [95% of high seas fish biodiversity](#) is not managed or even assessed by these organisations. They essentially ignore almost everything that isn't commercially valuable to them, allowing the industry to set the rules of the game.

It is in the best interest of the fishing industry and its ability to pillage the ocean that these organisations retain their power over the high seas. That’s why during the

Ocean Treaty negotiations, industry lobbied governments hard to ensure that the Treaty wouldn't "[undermine](#)" RFMO power. They even tried and failed to remove fishing activity from the scope of the Global Ocean Treaty altogether. This would have been a disaster for ocean protection, and would have meant that fully protected high seas sanctuaries wouldn't be able to kick out destructive human activity to allow the ocean to recover. But their influence reaches on as these organisations continue to lobby governments for maximum influence over the creation of sanctuaries, which would seriously delay the entire process.

Our ocean is being traded away behind closed doors

Despite the huge power these organisations have over our ocean and therefore the future of our entire planet's health, they have little to no public accountability. Meetings are often held [in secret](#), with key decisions around biodiversity measures reached in private or informally outside of their official public mechanisms and therefore not properly recorded. Journalists can rarely get in the room, and civil society participation and scientific scrutiny of key high seas governance meetings is [severely restricted](#). Meanwhile industry representatives are granted a seat at the table at key fishing management meetings, often being included in government delegations. This is a huge problem for transparency and understanding the scale of the ocean crisis we face.

The very way these fishing management organisations are structured compounds the problem. They operate through consensus based decision making, which allows a minority of actors to block progress towards conservation and protection. They also routinely [ignore recommendations](#) from their own scientific bodies about catch limits, bycatch and many Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems remain unprotected. Yet delegates at key RFMO meetings such as those from the fishing industry consistently sow doubt and exploit a lack of scientific certainty as delaying tactics to stall progress towards bold new conservation measures.

Lack of transparency and adequate data

It's no wonder that there's a huge problem with a lack of available data on industrial fishing given the organisations that govern it routinely [suppress it](#), ignore scientific evidence, or don't bother to collate it. This is why understanding the true extent of ocean destruction caused by the fishing industry on the high seas remains a huge challenge. Current data is patchy at best, bycatch is often misrecorded, and research suggests that [75% of the world's industrial fishing vessels](#) are not publicly tracked and therefore are hidden from view.

Of the fish species that are known to live in the high seas, [85.7%](#) have no information on their population trends, meaning we are fishing in the dark. There's also a large amount of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing that goes on with

estimates that it amounts to around [20% of the total global catch](#). Out of an assessment of 48 high seas fish stocks we know to be in the high seas [75% were considered depleted](#) or overfished in 2016.

Corporate lobbying against ocean protection

The fishing industry has been actively lobbying against ocean protection measures and to protect its profit margins for decades. Last year, [InfluenceMap](#) found that nearly all major seafood companies lobby against ocean protection. Twenty-nine of the 30 biggest seafood firms analysed were pushing policies that clash with global biodiversity goals. Behind the scenes, the same players were working to block the creation or expansion of ocean sanctuaries. Sanctuaries are the backbone of international plans to protect at least 30% of the ocean by 2030, a commitment that governments have made, and the absolute minimum scientists say is required for ocean health to have a chance of recovering.

Powerful lobby groups are still fighting restrictions on bottom trawling, a destructive fishing practice that devastates seabed ecosystems. Instead of backing science-based limits, some industry groups were pushing to [weaken environmental safeguards](#). This isn't just individual companies, big industry associations like Europeche have been working behind closed doors to shape policy, slowing down progress for ocean protection.

We must stop the rot of corporate interference

The fishing industry has been lobbying to weaken the Ocean Treaty for years, but we can't let them affect protection measures like the creation of sanctuaries. We urgently need transparency over the Ocean Treaty process and ocean governance more generally. Thousands of [fossil fuel lobbyists](#) were given access to UN climate summits over the past four years. We have the chance to learn from the mistakes of the past and stop the rot of corporate interference before the first Ocean COP, which could come any time between now and January 2027.

Greenpeace is calling on the UN to ensure that Prepcom and subsequent Ocean COP's are open and transparent by ensuring accurate delegation lists are published, and advisors' names and roles are disclosed by governments. Right now the delegation lists for Prep Coms 1 and 2 aren't publicly available, which is a problem for transparency. The first Ocean COP must set a precedent to guarantee structural integrity by doing things like ensuring it is open to observers, to make sure the mandate of the Treaty to protect the ocean always overrides the interests of the fishing industry.

Greenpeace demands fully protected high seas sanctuaries

During the third Prepcom meeting in New York this month, governments will make recommendations on how the treaty will be implemented, and they must make sure that the fishing industry does not hold the treaty process to ransom. We must ensure that we will be able to halt the power of destructive industrial fishing with the creation of fully protected sanctuaries. Currently [only 1%](#) of the high seas is protected. There are currently 39 high seas Marine Protected Areas, however, only three of these are fully protected from fishing activities, namely Ross Sea Region, Terres Australes Françaises, and South Orkney Islands Southern Shelf Marine Protected Area. The rest of them are protected in name only. This is why Greenpeace is calling on governments to create fully protected sanctuaries. Only this level of protection can ensure that vast areas of the ocean are closed to extractive and destructive human activities. This is the only way scientists say the ocean will be able to recover from decades of destruction.

Greenpeace demands a time limit for RFMO input into sanctuaries

Greenpeace is calling for a maximum 120 day time limit on how long Regional Fishing Management Organisations - who manage fishing in the high seas but have historically served the interests of the fishing industry - are able to input into the development of high seas sanctuary proposals. The fishing industry has been lobbying for years to weaken ocean protection measures, meaning that government delegations' positions at Prepcom have already been shaped in this context. These governments are therefore expected to push for a longer consultation period on the development of sanctuaries. This would tie the process up in delays and could see us missing the target of protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030, a key target that governments have committed to and that scientists say is the absolute minimum required for the ocean to recover.

What to look out for at PrepCom 3 in New York

Negotiations on the time limit that will affect RFMOs are expected to play out during the conference. Other interesting moments expected to play out during the conference are: negotiations around observer participation which is crucial for transparency, Indigenous People's participation at the first ocean COP, discussions on where the first Ocean COP will be held, and where the secretariat will be based following bids from China, Chile and Belgium.

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