

Keswick Reminder 04.07.25: NfWW No.90 Why the High Seas Treaty matters so much.

Did you see the film 'Ocean with David Attenborough'? If so you will have been horrified as I was by the footage of bottom trawling, whereby powerful trawlers drag weighted nets across the ocean floor to catch fish, sweeping up everything in their paths.

Popular with commercial fishing companies, because it makes it easy to catch large quantities of fish in one go, bottom trawling is one of the most destructive forms of fishing, killing vast numbers of non-target marine life – like coral, fur seals, turtles, dolphins and seabirds – and releasing carbon dioxide from ocean-floor sediment.

While the recent 3rd UN Ocean Conference which ended in Nice on 13th June did not directly demand countries move towards a ban, though some have, in practice it will have indirectly moved many towards restricting it, including the UK.

The aim of the conference, jointly hosted by France and Costa Rica, concluded with 50 countries ratifying a new High Seas Treaty which will, if that number reaches 60 by the time of the September UN General Assembly meeting, move us towards much greater protection for our oceans by becoming international law. The UK has yet to ratify.

Speaking of his film David Attenborough said, 'After almost 100 years on the planet, I now understand the most important place on Earth is not on land, but at sea.' And he concluded, 'If we save the ocean, we save our world.'

Why this eureka moment? Climate regulation is the ocean's most critical function. The oceans absorb about 25% of all carbon dioxide emissions and over 90% of the excess heat generated by climate change. They drive global weather patterns and ocean currents that distribute heat around the planet, moderating temperatures and making much of Earth habitable.

Oxygen production is another vital service. Marine phytoplankton, essentially the lungs of our planet, produce about half of the oxygen added to the atmosphere each year.

And then there is ocean biodiversity, with marine ecosystems containing an estimated 80% of all life on Earth. Coral reefs alone support about 25% of all marine species despite covering less than 1% of the ocean floor.

So this is why the High Seas Treaty matters so much.

Known formally as the 'Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction', the treaty was signed by 67 countries in September 2023 as part of efforts to reverse damage done to fragile marine environments by overfishing and other human activities.

What the treaty does is to address a critical gap in ocean governance, as two-thirds of the oceans are currently regulated by a patchwork of agreements and organisations.

The treaty's primary goal will be enabling the establishment of marine protected areas in international waters, safeguarding the ocean from human pressures in a major contribution to reducing climate change and protecting biodiversity. If realised this will be no small achievement.

Join us at sustainablekeswick@gmail.com

Joe Human
Sustainable Keswick