

# MPA NEWS



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## UN Working Group Recommends Path toward Multilateral Agreement on High Seas Conservation, Including MPAs

Conservation of biodiversity on the high seas took a significant step forward in June: a working group of the United Nations General Assembly recommended the establishment of a process that could lead to a multilateral agreement on high seas conservation and sustainable use. Specifically the recommendations call for crafting a legal regime under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to conserve marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction - including by designating MPAs. Currently no mechanism exists to designate MPAs on the high seas that would apply to all nations. High seas comprise 64% of the world ocean.

The consensus recommendations will be considered for approval by the UN General Assembly in September this year. The group that made the recommendations - the Ad Hoc Open-ended Informal Working Group - involved 200 participants representing governments, UN agencies, and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

MPA News spoke with Kristina Gjerde, high seas policy advisor for the IUCN Global Marine Program, about the significance of the Working Group's recommendations and how they emerged:

**MPA News:** What do the Working Group's recommendations signify for MPAs on the high seas?

**Kristina Gjerde:** The significance of the June 3 Working Group recommendations is that they pave the way for a possible global agreement for high seas conservation, including the establishment of high seas MPAs. At the very least, States have agreed (assuming the recommendations are adopted by the UN General Assembly) to establish a more formal "process" empowered to identify new ways to improve implementation of existing commitments to high seas conservation as well as to consider the possible development of a new multilateral agreement.

**MPA News:** You and others have been working for years to build support for a multilateral process for high seas conservation ("Recent Developments toward a System of High-Seas MPAs", [MPA News 8:1](#)). What allowed this breakthrough to happen?

**Gjerde:** All States at the UN Working Group recognized the need to address a package of issues of interest to a wide range of nations. These specifically included marine genetic resources and questions relating to their benefit sharing, capacity building, and technology transfer. On the high seas, only a handful of States (mainly developed countries) have access to marine genetic resources or the technologies needed to exploit them. Thus when the developed States agreed to consider these equity concerns, the developing States came out in strong support for a higher-level, UN-based process empowered to focus on practical and legal measures, rather than to continue to merely "study" the issues, as the current UN Working Group mandate provides.

**MPA News:** What is the likelihood that the UN General Assembly will adopt the recommendations later this year?

**Gjerde:** Relatively high. There was very strong and enthusiastic support from nearly all the States at the UN Working Group meeting. Nevertheless there is work to be done to build public and political support at home and abroad.

**MPA News:** There were also recommendations on high seas MPAs made last year at the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity ([MPA News 12:3](#)). Can you place those in the context of the Working Group's recommendations?

**Gjerde:** Last year's CBD Conference of Parties (CBD decision X/29) agreed to a science-based process for identifying areas of ecological or biological significance. This scientific input is essential to support the development of specific MPAs as well as other area-based management tools.

Nevertheless, as the CBD does not have the legal authority to "designate" high seas MPAs or to adopt management measures for activities such as fishing or shipping, the UN Working Group's June 3 recommendations are a vital step forward as they can lead to a global political process to improve high seas conservation, including through more integrated and coordinated ecosystem-based management and tools such as high seas MPAs.

[Editor's note: an IUCN press release on the Working Group's recommendations and supplementary material are at [www.iucn.org/?uNewsID=7612](http://www.iucn.org/?uNewsID=7612).]

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