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Summary of the Blue Leaders High-Level Event: 7 March 2024

The adoption of the treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ Treaty) in June 2023 is widely viewed as a significant achievement for multilateralism. Representatives from governments, intergovernmental organizations, science, and civil society came together for the Blue Leaders High-Level Event in Brussels, Belgium, to celebrate this milestone and mobilize support for the Treaty’s swift entry into force.

All speakers agreed on the aim of using the third UN Ocean Conference in June 2025 in Nice, France, as a platform to mark the entry into force of the BBNJ Treaty. For this to happen, 60 countries will have to ratify the agreement by February 2025. Thus far, Palau and Chile are the only two countries that have ratified the agreement, in the “race to ratification.”

During the event, Paul Van Tigchelt, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and the North Sea, Belgium, announced that Belgium passed the first step in its federal ratification process. Prince Albert II of Monaco shared that Monaco aims to complete its ratification process by the end of 2024.

Lord Richard Benyon, Minister of State for Climate, Environment, and Energy, UK, noted his country is reviewing what legislative changes are needed to comply with the BBNJ Treaty at the national level, and offering to support developing countries in conducting similar assessments. Sebastian Unger, Federal Commissioner for the Ocean, Germany, announced an upcoming call for projects under Germany’s International Climate Initiative to support countries in the Global South in identifying marine protected areas (MPAs), noting this will contribute to kick-starting implementation of the Treaty.

Key take-aways from the event included that:

- the BBNJ Treaty, through the designation of MPAs, is key to reaching the objectives of the Global Biodiversity Framework, especially the target to protect 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine areas by 2030;
- a range of ocean-climate interlinkages exist, with several speakers highlighting the role of kelp forests as habitat for endangered species and as carbon sinks;
- the need for enhanced global cooperation to advance ocean science, with small island developing states (SIDS) emphasizing the importance of technology transfer and capacity building; and



Blue Leaders family photo

- the value of art as a vehicle to raise awareness and build support for ocean conservation.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo highlighted his country’s offer to host the BBNJ Secretariat in Brussels and underscored the objective of fostering swift ratification of the treaty within the EU.

Over 100 participants, including several ministers and many ambassadors, attended the event, which was organized as part of Belgium’s Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2024.

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A Brief History of Marine Biodiversity Governance

The conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity, including in areas beyond national jurisdiction, has been receiving increasing international attention: recent scientific information reveals the richness and vulnerability of such biodiversity, while concerns grow about the increasing anthropogenic pressures posed by existing and emerging activities, such as fishing, mining, pollution, and climate change. Against this background, various international processes and multilateral environmental agreements strive to contribute to the sustainable governance of marine biodiversity.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which entered into force on 16 November 1994, sets forth the rights and obligations of states regarding use of the Ocean, its resources, and the protection of the marine and coastal environment. Although UNCLOS does not explicitly refer to marine biodiversity, it is commonly regarded as the legal framework for all ocean-related activities.

UNCLOS is also the Convention under which the UN General Assembly convened negotiations towards a new treaty on BBNJ. After nearly two decades of negotiations, the BBNJ Treaty was adopted in June 2023, and will enter into force 120 days after ratification by 60 countries. Thus far, the Treaty has been ratified by Palau and Chile.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) which entered into force on 29 December 1993, aims to promote biodiversity conservation, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the use of genetic resources. A centerpiece of the CBD's work on coastal and marine biodiversity is the identification of ecologically or biologically significant marine areas. In 2022, parties to the CBD adopted the Global Biodiversity Framework, which, among others, stipulates the target to ensure that by 2030 at least 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and marine and coastal areas are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected, and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (the 30x30 target).

Other relevant processes and institutions include the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, the International Seabed Authority, the Ocean Dialogue convened under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the ongoing negotiations for an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. Furthermore, the UN has been convening Ocean Conferences since 2017 to mobilize governments and other stakeholders to make commitments towards ocean sustainability. In addition, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) to stimulate ocean science and knowledge generation with a view to reverse the decline of the state of the ocean system and catalyze new opportunities for sustainable development.



Paul Van Tigchelt, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and the North Sea, Belgium

Report of the Blue Leaders High-Level Event

The day-long event featured panel discussions, artistic performances, and a ceremony during which high-level dignitaries expressed their “wish for the Ocean.”

Opening Segment

Welcome remarks by Paul Van Tigchelt, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and the North Sea, Belgium, congratulated Palau on being the first country to ratify the BBNJ Treaty, and shared that Belgium has passed the first step in its federal ratification process. He underscored the importance of its swift entry into force and implementation, and proposed exploring innovative approaches to ensure its enforcement. He called for keeping the Ocean in the spotlight, including in the climate change negotiations, and emphasized collaboration between states, sectors, and stakeholders from science, non-governmental organizations, and youth.

In a keynote, wildlife filmmaker Inka Cresswell shared insights into her professional journey of transitioning from marine biology to wildlife filmmaking. She projected videographic “tales from the frontlines,” emphasizing the carbon sequestration potential of kelp forests, insights gained from shark tagging, and the value of community-driven coral restoration projects. She urged decision makers to implement biodiversity conservation goals, especially highlighting the need for networks



Inka Cresswell, marine biologist and wildlife filmmaker



Nina Maat, Founder, Muses United for Circular Economy

of marine protected areas (MPAs) to effectively protect migratory species.

Nina Maat, Founder, Muses United for Circular Economy, presented a work of art created with artist Bogenna Ivana Niekooop, depicting a white-colored cold-water coral (*Lophelia pertusa*). She emphasized culture as a tool to scale up sustainable transformations in society and draw citizens and other stakeholders into discussing options for sustainability.

Panel 1 – BBNJ

Moderator Elisa De Raes, Legal Counsel and First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Belgium to the UN, described the BBNJ Treaty as a landmark achievement after almost two decades of negotiations.

Miguel de Serpa Soares, UN Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, lauded the successful conclusion of the negotiations on the BBNJ Treaty in a time of intense doubts about multilateralism. He delineated the steps needed to operationalize the agreement, highlighting among other things, institutional and budgetary matters and the establishment of a clearing-house mechanism. He pointed to regional and capacity-building workshops to support this process. Highlighting the many entities focusing on ocean matters, he noted that successful implementation of the BBNJ Treaty requires careful coordination and collaboration.

Sebastian Unger, Federal Commissioner for the Ocean, Germany, expressed hope that many countries will have ratified the Treaty prior to the 3rd UN Ocean Conference in Nice, France, in 2025. Beyond ratification, he emphasized the need to lay the groundwork for swift implementation of the Treaty, both by sorting out technical and administrative questions at the Treaty level and identifying areas for MPA designation. He called for building on existing knowledge, highlighting the ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSA) process under the CBD and lauding transnational scientific cooperation. He announced the German government will open a call for projects under its international climate initiative to support countries in the Global South in the identification of MPAs, keeping in mind the objective of building MPA networks.



Peggy Rodgers Kalas, Oceano Azul Foundation

Peggy Rodgers Kalas, Oceano Azul Foundation, delineated how civil society organizations support the BBNJ process. She highlighted their communication work aimed at mobilizing public attention, recalling that actor Javier Bardem marched with Greenpeace on the margins of the BBNJ negotiations and pointing to creative advertising campaigns ahead of G7 meetings. She also emphasized the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in building bridges between governments and in mobilizing scientific expertise and echoing marginalized voices, including through convening side events and intersessional workshops. She urged swift entry into force of the Treaty, calling for leadership by EU countries, and noted NGOs have worked with scientists to identify priority areas for the establishment of MPAs.

Darius Campbell, Secretary, North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), shared views on the implementation of the BBNJ Treaty from the perspective of a regional fisheries management organization (RFMO). He noted ongoing collaboration between RFMOs, such as NEAFC, and the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic and said the Treaty will help enhance collaboration between existing bodies and frameworks. He cautioned that MPAs and other effective area-based conservation measures are typically two-dimensional in their approach, while the Ocean must be “managed in 3D.”

Sheena Talma, marine biologist, Seychelles, emphasized the value of engaging scientists and youth in multilateral processes such as BBNJ. She stressed that much of the burden of implementing the BBNJ Treaty will fall on SIDS. Noting that ratification is the easiest step in the journey towards ocean health, she urged ensuring financial resources to enable implementation.

Ocean Commitment Ceremony

High-level dignitaries from various countries expressed their “wish for the Ocean,” which they symbolically added to the coral artwork prepared for the event.

Abraão Vicente, Minister of Culture and Creative Industries and Minister of the Sea, Cabo Verde, noted his country, is particularly vulnerable to climate change, as is also the case for other SIDS. He lauded the tireless efforts of scientists and local



Abraão Vicente, Minister of Culture and Creative Industries and Minister of the Sea, Cabo Verde

communities working on marine conservation, especially coral reef protection, and urged bold leadership and collective action to ensure swift implementation of the BBNJ Treaty.

Lord Richard Benyon, Minister of State for Climate, Environment, and Energy, UK, emphasized upholding the centrality of UNCLOS as the core legal framework under which all action on the Ocean must be carried out. He highlighted the [UK's Blue Planet Fund](#), which supports developing countries in protecting the marine environment and reducing poverty. Noting the UK is reviewing what legislative changes are needed to comply with the BBNJ Treaty, he offered to support developing countries in conducting similar assessments.

Via video, Adegboyega Oyetola, Minister of Marine and Blue Economy, Nigeria, underscored the importance of the Ocean as habitat for various species and a source of food and livelihood for many people. He called for the global response to marine biodiversity decline to be commensurate with the planetary emergency, emphasizing the need to share benefits derived from the Ocean and hold each other accountable for the implementation of commitments.

Maria Varteressian, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Norway, recalled that humanity erroneously thought its activities were too small to affect the Ocean, underscoring the magnitude of marine pollution, sea-level rise, and ocean acidification. She called the adoption of the BBNJ Treaty a triumph for international cooperation and a historic moment for ocean governance. Actions in the next ten years will define ocean health for the next century, she said.

Sebastian Unger, Federal Commissioner for the Ocean, Germany, highlighted that his country is working on improving the level of protection of its MPAs and started a programme to salvage ammunition dumped at sea. He noted the Global Environment Facility will play an important role in supporting implementation of the BBNJ Treaty and emphasized collaboration with the International Maritime Organization, International Seabed Authority, UN Environment Programme, and RFMOs.

Via video, Virginijus Sinkevičius, EU Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans, and Fisheries, underscored a growing sense of urgency to protect the Ocean and commended Palau and Chile for their swift ratification of the BBNJ Treaty. He urged ensuring the Treaty enters into force quickly to support the establishment of MPAs and reach the objectives of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Nancy Karigithu, Special Envoy for Maritime and Blue Economy, Kenya, gushed that the Ocean connects people and makes everyone neighbors. She stressed that humankind depends on sound, safe, and healthy maritime domains, and billions of people depend directly on a healthy Ocean for their livelihoods. She deplored the impacts of pollution, overfishing, and unsustainable coastal development, and highlighted that stability and development are closely linked.

Petros Varelidis, Director, Greek Natural Environment and Climate Change Agency, illustrated the importance of shipping and tourism for the Greek economy. He called for swift ratification of the BBNJ Treaty, agreement on “national jurisdiction” as defined under UNCLOS, and addressing plastic pollution.

Barry Lennon, Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland, announced that Ireland is joining the Blue Leaders. He underscored the importance of collaboration in addressing global issues and called for applying the precautionary approach.

Vanessa Lopes, Fellow, Ocean Voices, called on SIDS to maintain leadership with respect to BBNJ, noting that SIDS are ecologically and culturally connected to the Ocean. She emphasized that no country can implement the BBNJ Treaty alone and called for support for the [Alliance of Small Island States' Marine Science Declaration](#) and the transfer of marine technology.

Paul Van Tigchelt, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and the North Sea, Belgium, noted his country is committed to supporting the 30x30 target. He emphasized Belgium will use its role as President of the EU Council in 2024 to foster a swift ratification of the BBNJ Treaty within the EU.



Maria Varteressian, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Norway

Panel 2 – Links between the 30x30 Target and Climate Change

Moderator Sophie Mirgaux, Special Envoy for the Ocean, Belgium, invited panelists to reflect on the role of the BBNJ Treaty within the broader landscape of international environmental governance.

Lord Richard Benyon, Minister of State for Climate, Environment, and Energy, UK, drew attention to the Blue Belt Programme, which helps the UK Overseas Territories to protect and enhance ocean health. He highlighted the Ocean as a buffer to climate change and essential to the integrity of the web of life. He called for working together towards shared commitments, such as on climate change and nature degradation. On BBNJ, he emphasized the need for highly protected marine areas, leveraging new technology to deliver meaningful enforcement, addressing marine genetic resources, harnessing blue carbon, and finance for the blue economy.

Catherine Chabaud, European Parliament, promoted the idea of a European Blue Deal, noting the challenge of promoting a holistic response that cuts across sectoral silos. She noted that the Ocean is a global common, with no borders between the seafloor and the water column. Owing to this, she said, efforts to protect the Ocean are hailed as a success for multilateralism and peace in difficult times. She called for a moratorium on deep sea mining and to ground decision making in science.

Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, UCLouvain, shared insights from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate](#). He explained that the Ocean has absorbed a quarter of human-induced carbon emissions and delayed atmospheric warming by trapping heat, but that the resulting ocean acidification and warming threatens marine life. He emphasized opportunities related to ocean-based renewable energy and the conservation of

kelp and mangrove forests for carbon sequestration and coastal protection.

Yara Rodrigues, Instituto do Mar, Cabo Verde, underscored the role of the BBNJ Treaty in enhancing marine technology transfer and ensuring benefit sharing from marine genetic resources. She emphasized blue bonds to support SIDS' ocean action and urged increased research collaboration, noting that SIDS lack research vessels and access to satellite data.

Camille Delaunoy, UN Youth Delegate for Biodiversity, called for enhanced environmental education, especially focusing on empowering youth to understand the interlinkages between global challenges such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and conflict. She underscored rising eco-anxiety among young people who do not know what kind of future lies ahead for them, emphasizing that decisions made today will have lasting effects.

Closing Segment

Vidar Helgesen, Executive Secretary, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, discussed the [Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development \(2021-2030\)](#) with its slogan “The science we need for the Ocean we want.” He underscored the rationale behind the Decade, including the need to protect, restore, and regenerate the Ocean. He drew attention to initiatives related to, among others, the [Ocean Biodiversity Information System](#), analyzing environmental DNA collected in marine World Heritage Sites, and enhanced marine pest species surveillance.

“In the environmental field, good news is scarce, so this is worth celebrating,” said Prince Albert II of Monaco, thanking ocean advocates for their tenacity in pushing for a successful outcome to the BBNJ negotiations. He recalled that agreement seemed elusive at times during the almost two-decades-long process and, pointing for instance to ongoing negotiations



(L-R): **Catherine Chabaud**, Member of the European Parliament; **Yara Rodrigues**, Atlantic Technical University of Cape Verde; **Camille Delaunoy**, UN Youth Delegate for Biodiversity; **Jean-Pascal van Ypersele**, UCLouvain; Lord **Richard Benyon**, Minister of State for Climate, Environment, and Energy, UK; and Moderator **Sophie Mirgaux**, Special Envoy for the Ocean, Belgium



His Serene Highness **Prince Albert II** of Monaco

towards an agreement on plastic pollution, he underscored that environmental challenges have become so overwhelming that agreements that seemed beyond reach ten years ago are now feasible. He announced Monaco’s aim to complete its BBNJ ratification process by the end of 2024 and called for more coordination between the biodiversity and climate communities.

Alexander De Croo, Prime Minister, Belgium, noted that multilateral decision making is not an easy task and thanked all Blue Leaders for their engagement towards adoption of the BBNJ Treaty. “Now is the moment to turn words into action,” he said, reiterating his call for the Treaty’s entry into force by the UN Ocean Conference in 2025. Highlighting the Global Biodiversity Framework’s 2030 deadline, he urged rapid progress on the designation of MPAs and noted Belgium has established protected areas in its part of the North Sea, despite intense commercial shipping, energy production, and tourism in the area. He reiterated Belgium’s offer to host the BBNJ Secretariat in Brussels, emphasizing the city is easily accessible from all around the world and features a strong international representation.

Upcoming Meetings

9th Our Ocean Conference: The conference will convene under the motto: “Our Ocean, An Ocean of Potential.” **dates:** 16-17 April 2024, with a youth summit on 15 April **location:** Athens, Greece **www:** ourocean2024.gov.gr

Plastic Pollution INC-4: The fourth meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, will continue negotiations on the instrument. **dates:** 23-29 April 2024 **location:** Ottawa, Canada **www:** unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution/session-4

2024 UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF): This meeting will convene on the theme “Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and eradicating poverty in times of multiple crises: The effective delivery of sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions.” It will include in-depth reviews of SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero



Alexander De Croo, Prime Minister, Belgium

hunger), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and SDG 17 (partnerships for the Goals). **dates:** 8-17 July 2024 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** hlpf.un.org

Summit of the Future: Building on the SDG Summit in 2023, Member States will consider ways to lay the foundation for more effective global cooperation that can deal with today’s challenges as well as new threats in the future. **dates:** 22-23 September 2024 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future

CBD COP 16: The sixteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the CBD, the eleventh meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and the fifth meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit sharing will convene for the first time since the adoption of the Global Biodiversity Framework. **dates:** 21 October - 1 November 2024 **location:** Cali, Colombia **www:** cbd.int/meetings

For additional upcoming events, see: sdg.iisd.org

Glossary

BBNJ	Biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
COP	Conference of the Parties
EBSA	Ecologically or biologically significant marine areas
MPA	Marine Protected Area
NEAFC	North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission
RFMO	Regional fisheries management organization
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	Small island developing states
UNCLOS	UN Convention on the Law of the Sea