

Deep-sea mining: growing support for a moratorium

Concerns over the potential environmental impacts of deep-sea mining have led to increasing support for a moratorium. The reasons behind the moratorium calls range from uncertainties over the full extent of the risks given a lack of scientific information, to questions over the technical capability and accountability of the relevant authorities to properly manage mining contractors.

“The rush to mine this pristine and unexplored environment risks creating terrible impacts that cannot be reversed. We need to be guided by science when faced with decisions of such great environmental consequence.”¹

Sir David Attenborough, March 2020

The absence of a coherent, effective international policy to safeguard the marine environment, along with insufficient evidence of the net benefit it may have for humankind, have led many experts to decide that the high risks associated with deep-sea mining outweigh the potential benefits.

Support for a moratorium has also come from the following:

Scientific leaders

Leading scientists have voiced their concerns about deep-sea mining.² Many are calling for a moratorium to allow time to gather more scientific information on deep-sea biodiversity and ecosystems.

They argue that society’s lack of understanding of the deep ocean makes it impossible to properly assess the potential impacts of mining and to establish adequate safeguards. They are concerned that mining

“[Society] has to have a full understanding of what the impacts of this activity are going to be and how to best manage that so it has minimal damage. And at the moment we are not even in the ballpark of having that level of knowledge. So there should be at least a 10-year moratorium on any mining in the deep ocean.”⁴

Professor Alex Rogers, science director of REV Ocean, a visiting professor and senior research fellow at Oxford University, August 2019

would disturb and threaten seafloor ecosystems and create plumes of sediment that could obstruct the breathing systems of marine animals, release toxic metals and also cause noise, vibration and light pollution.

Right: Green eye.

“It’s time to press the pause button [on seabed mining]”³

Professor Jane Lubchenco, a marine ecologist at Oregon State University and a former administrator of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, November 2019



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Political leaders

In light of the uncertainties and high stakes related to deep-sea mining, an increasing number of world leaders, national and international institutions are deciding that their support for the sector would violate their political commitments and breach obligations to protect the marine environment.

“There is a UN decade for Ocean science, which has been agreed to by 193 countries ... Why wouldn't we give that decade its full run before we start even thinking about disturbing the seabed of the high seas? We are talking a moratorium of 10 years in that case.”⁵

The United Nations Secretary General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, Ambassador Peter Thomson, January 2019

Below: moderately large manganese nodules covering a lighter-colored sediment primarily occupied by large hexactinellid sponges approximately 0.5 to 1 meters tall.

Parliaments

In January 2018, the European Parliament adopted by an overwhelming majority a resolution⁶ calling for a moratorium “until such time as the effects of deep-sea mining on the marine environment, biodiversity and human activities at sea have been studied and researched sufficiently and all possible risks are understood”.

The European Parliament called on the European Union to invest instead in sustainable alternatives, specifically in a transition to sustainable consumption and production”.⁷

In January 2019, the UK House of Commons' Environment Audit Committee issued a report⁸ saying it considered that “the exploitation of resources must be prohibited in unique ocean environments, such as hydrothermal vents, until it can be determined that adequate mitigation techniques are available”. It also highlighted that the International Seabed Authority (ISA) was generating revenue from issuing mining licenses, which presents “a clear conflict of interest” with its obligations to regulate mining.

Pacific Island nations

At a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in August 2019, the Prime Minister of Fiji called for a moratorium on deep-sea mining in national waters until the conclusion of the UN Decade of Ocean Science in 2030.⁹ The Prime Ministers of Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG) supported the call, as did civil society organizations in the Pacific Islands.¹⁰

The fishing industry

In May 2019, the EU's Long Distance (Fishing) Fleet Advisory Council (LDAC) adopted a resolution¹¹ advising the European Commission and EU Member States to support a moratorium on deep-sea mining in international waters. Established by the EU to advise it on international fisheries issues, LDAC includes fishing companies and fleets that represent a large portion of the EU's high seas and distant water fishing fleets.

Non-governmental organizations

A wide range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have called on the international community to introduce a moratorium on deep-sea mining. These include:

- Several German NGOs including the German Federation for Environment and Nature Conservation (BUND), PowerShift, Fair Oceans, Brot für die Welt, MISEREOR, Stiftung Asienhaus, Forum Umwelt and Entwicklung.¹² (December 2016)





Above: Farreid glass sponges in the foreground of this fairly high-density sponge community, depth approximately 2,360 meters. Corals also present, in lower abundance. Iridogorgia and bamboo coral in the background.

- A network of 39 NGOs led by Seas At Risk and its members, along with Mission Blue, BLOOM, the Deep Sea Mining Campaign and Earthworks.¹³ (June 2017)
- 50 leading international NGOs who supported a joint statement¹⁴ submitted to the ISA in April. (April to July 2018)
- The Papua New Guinea Council of Churches, Voice of Milne Bay, Alliance of Solwara Warriors, Bismarck Ramu Group, and the Center for Environmental Law and Community Rights, who published an open letter to the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea.¹⁵ (June 2019)
- Greenpeace.¹⁶ (July 2019)
- The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, an alliance of over 80 international organizations.¹⁷ (August 2019)
- More than 100 environmental organizations led by Seas At Risk, BirdLife Europe, ClientEarth, Oceana, Surfrider Foundation Europe, Conservation International and WWF in their Blue Manifesto.¹⁸ (January 2020)
- Civil society, fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples and philanthropic organizations in the RISE UP Blue Call to Action.¹⁹ (February 2020)
- The Sustainable Ocean Alliance.²⁰ (March 2020)
- Fauna & Flora International.²¹ (March 2020)
- WWF.²² (May 2020)

“A moratorium on seabed mining – given its inherent risks and how little is known about life on the seafloor – is just plain common sense, and particularly in light of recent global biodiversity assessments showing the planet is suffering unprecedented species loss that will have profound impacts on nature and humanity at large.”²³

John Tanzer, Leader, Oceans Practice, WWF, May 2019

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Above: a sea toad.

Recommendation

Widespread concern about the vulnerability of deep-sea habitats and ecosystems, the scale and nature of proposed mining practices, the lack of information to conduct a thorough environmental impact assessment and deficiencies in the ISA as a regulatory body all make a clear case that a moratorium on deep-sea mining is essential.

Instead of opening a new frontier of industrial mining in the deep sea, efforts should be channelled into the transition towards a more circular, environmentally and socially responsible model of production, consumption and reuse of raw materials, and include the transition to an economy fuelled by renewable energy.

About the DSCC

The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) was founded in 2004 to address the need to prevent damage to deep-sea ecosystems and the depletion of deep-sea species on the high seas from bottom trawling and other forms of deep-sea fishing. The DSCC is made up of over 80 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), fishers organizations and law and policy institutes, all committed to protecting the deep sea.

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Endnotes

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- 3 Financial Times (2019) Who's in charge of the high seas? <https://www.ft.com/content/dcbc6e94-de26-11e9-b8e0-026e07cbe5b4> [Date accessed: 12/05/2020].
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- 5 As quoted in the opening statement of Algeria, on behalf of the African Group of nations, to the 25th Session of the Council of the International Seabed Authority, 15 February 2019. <https://www.isa.org.jm/document/algeria-obo-african-group>
- 6 European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2018 on international ocean governance: an agenda for the future of our oceans in the context of the 2030 SDGs. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0004_EN.html paragraphs 42, 19, 22 & 67. The resolution called for an end to subsidies for prospecting minerals on the international seabed and an end to permits for deep-sea mining in areas within national jurisdiction. In addition, it requested EU countries, as members of ISA, to ensure that the authority is transparent, has the capacity to assess environmental impacts, and can effectively protect and preserve the marine environment from harmful effects, as required under Parts XI and XII of the UN's Convention of the Law of the Sea.
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