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.”
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**
Over 600 leading marine science and policy experts have voiced their concerns about deep-sea mining. Many are calling for a moratorium to allow time to gather more scientific information on deep-sea biodiversity and ecosystems.

Scientists 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 would destroy seafloor ecosystems and create plumes of sediment that could obstruct the breathing systems of marine animals, release toxic metals and cause noise, vibration and light pollution. They also warn that strip-mining the deep could impact carbon sequestration dynamics and deep-ocean carbon storage in ways that we cannot yet fully comprehend.

“[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.”
Professor Alex Rogers, a visiting professor and senior research fellow at Oxford University, August 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.”

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

In January 2018, the European Parliament adopted by an overwhelming majority a resolution 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". In June 2021 the European Parliament called on the European Commission and Member States to “promote a moratorium, including at the International Seabed Authority, on deep-seabed mining” and urged the Commission to “cease funding for the development of seabed mining technology in line with a circular economy based on minimising, reusing and recycling minerals and metals.”

In January 2019, the UK House of Commons’ Environment Audit Committee issued a report 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”. This was followed by a Communication published by the European Commission in May 2020 which states that “the EU should advocate that marine minerals in the international seabed area cannot be exploited before the effects of deep-sea mining on the marine environment, biodiversity and human activities have been sufficiently researched, the risks are understood and the technologies and operational practices are able to demonstrate no serious harm to the environment, in line with the precautionary principle and taking into account the call of the European Parliament. The EU should also advocate for more transparency in international bodies such as the International Seabed Authority.”

In September 2021, participants at the IUCN World Conservation Congress voted overwhelmingly in favor of a moratorium on deep-sea mining and a reform of the International Seabed Authority. 81% of the States and 95% of the NGOs present supported the call.

Since 2021, a ban on deep-sea mining has also been enacted in the territorial waters of the Northern Territory in Australia, Washington State in the US, and Guam. In 2021, the New Zealand Supreme Court also ruled against a seabed mining proposal in its territorial waters and the Parliament of the Canary Islands called for a moratorium on deep-sea mining in international waters.

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. The Prime Ministers of Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu supported the call, as did numerous civil society organizations.

Below: moderately large manganese nodules covering a lighter-colored sediment primarily occupied by large hexactinellid sponges approximately 0.5 to 1 meters tall.
Businesses and financial institutions
Leading global companies have announced their support for a global moratorium on deep seabed mining. Companies including BMW Group, Samsung SDI, Google and Volvo Group have pledged not to source any minerals from the deep sea, to refrain from using mineral resources from the deep sea in their supply chains, and not to finance deep-sea mining activities. Other companies and financial institutions are following suit.

The fishing industry
In May 2019, the EU’s Long Distance (Fishing) Fleet Advisory Council (LDAC) adopted a resolution advising the European Commission and EU Member States to support a moratorium on deep-sea mining in international waters, which was reiterated in November 2021. Since then, other fisheries groups have joined the moratorium call including Europe’s Pelagic and Southwestern Waters LDACs, the International Pole and Line Foundation, the Norwegian Fisheries Association, the South Africa Tuna Association, and the South African Hake Long Line Association.

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:

- The Pacific Blue Line collective, who have called for a ban on seabed mining, which has been endorsed by over 100 organizations (August 2021)
- The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, an alliance of around 100 international organizations, including Fauna & Flora International, WWF, and Greenpeace (August 2021)
- The Responsible Mining Foundation (June 2021)
- Amnesty International (February 2021)
- Civil society, fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples, and philanthropic organizations in the RISE UP Blue Call to Action (February 2020)
- 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 (January 2020)
- 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 (June 2017)
Recommendation

Widespread concern about the vulnerability of deep-sea habitats and ecosystems, climate impacts, 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.

Endnotes


