PRESS RELEASE

Big Ocean States at the frontline of climate change call on world leaders to urgently ratify the High Seas Treaty

30 May 2024, St. John’s, Antigua and Barbuda: The small island developing States (SIDS) of Palau, Maldives, Fiji, Mauritius, Belize, and the Federated States of Micronesia, joined Singapore and Monaco today in calling for more ambitious action by all nations to avert the crises of global heating and biodiversity loss by prioritizing the ratification and implementation of the new High Seas Treaty (formally called the BBNJ Agreement).

The call was issued during a high-level event, ‘SIDS leadership in the Race for Ratification - action to protect marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction’, co-sponsored by Antigua & Barbuda, the Republic of Maldives and Republic of Vanuatu, held at the United Nations (UN) Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in Antigua and Barbuda, a once-in-a-decade conference where SIDS - home to more than 20% of the world’s biodiversity and 40% of its coral reefs - agree their new 10-year Plan of Action to advance “Resilient Prosperity”.

“Small island developing States are at the frontline of the escalating crises of global heating, biodiversity loss, and pollution, and yet they are continuing to lead the fight for ocean climate action. The new High Seas Treaty represents a rare and critical opportunity for humankind to mitigate these crises by protecting biodiversity in the ocean beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ) and building its resilience to climate change and other stressors. This week, many small island developing States have reaffirmed their determination to avoid the ongoing destruction of their island homes and the connected global ocean, by supporting the urgent entry into force of the High Seas Treaty,” said Rebecca Hubbard, Director of the High Seas Alliance.

The High Seas - the ocean beyond countries’ maritime borders – covers half the planet, is home to much of Earth’s biodiversity and plays an essential role in regulating our climate. This vast ocean area supports some of the most important, yet critically endangered ecosystems on Earth, yet a lack of governance has left it increasingly vulnerable to overexploitation. Currently, only 1.5% of the High Seas is fully protected.

“The BBNJ Agreement strengthens the global toolkit to respond to the triple crises that SIDS face on climate, biodiversity, and pollution. The Agreement opens a new chapter for equity on the ocean for SIDS but its implementation must be robust, and give effect to key provisions for benefit sharing, finance, capacity building, and the transfer of technology,”

SIDS are frontrunners in the Race for Ratification\(^4\) of the High Seas Treaty: three of the five countries that have ratified the Treaty so far are SIDS: Palau, Belize and Seychelles, while the Federated States of Micronesia and Mauritius have ratified nationally and are in the process of formally submitting their instruments of ratification to the United Nations. Meanwhile, 90 countries have signed the Treaty, thereby expressing their intent to ratify\(^5\).

One of the features of the High Seas Treaty is the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLC) and their traditional knowledge in the decision and policy-making process. “80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity is situated in the territories of Indigenous Peoples, who have been preserving marine ecosystems for thousands of years. By integrating Indigenous knowledge into the High Seas Treaty, we recognize the invaluable contributions of Indigenous Peoples and tap into a wealth of wisdom honed over millennia,” said Ghazali Ohorella, BBNJ advisor, International Indian Treaty Council.

Once 60 countries have ratified the Treaty, it will become the first international law to mandate the conservation and management of biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. Transforming the Treaty agreement into action in the water is essential to achieving the goal of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of our ocean by 2030. This is because it will provide the world’s first international legal framework to create marine protected areas (MPAs) on the High Seas and require comprehensive environmental impact assessments of potentially harmful activities in this vast ocean area.

“Last week’s maritime court ruling\(^6\) that fossil fuel emissions constitute marine pollution underlines why all nations must urgently follow the leadership shown by these governments today. We must unite behind the leadership of small island developing States in the race to ratify the High Seas Treaty so that we can protect the global ocean that connects and supports us all, defend the world’s most climate-vulnerable nations, and safeguard livelihoods worldwide,” added Rebecca Hubbard.

The High Seas Alliance and its members are working with governments to ensure at least 60 countries have ratified the Treaty by the UN Ocean Conference in June 2025 so it can enter into force shortly after.

Quotes from representatives at today’s high-level event:

**Hon. Maliki Osman, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs and Education, Singapore:** “The adoption of the BBNJ Agreement last June was a milestone achievement which recognises the fact that our global commons must be managed collectively and in a coordinated manner. However, for the Agreement to have a tangible impact on the global commons, we must work towards its early entry into force.”

**Hon. Thoriq Ibrahim, Minister of Climate Change, Environment and Energy, Maldives:** "For Maldives, our goal is to uphold our tradition of coexistence with nature by prioritizing the protection of biological resources. The BBNJ Treaty is a crucial step towards this goal, and we request all nations to ratify it and bring it into force."
Ambassador Isabelle Picco of Monaco: “The BBNJ Agreement will be a crucial piece of the international legal regime for the effective conservation of marine biodiversity. Under the leadership of His Serene Highness Prince Albert II, Monaco ratified the Agreement on 9 May 2024 and looks forward to its swift entry into force and implementation.”

Ambassador Jeem Lippwe of Federated States of Micronesia: “FSM was the first country to sign the BBNJ Agreement. We are proud of our neighbor, Palau, for being the first to deposit its instrument of ratification and wholeheartedly congratulate them. Our own instrument has been finalized and will be deposited at the UN in New York next week.”

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. SIDS comprise 37 UN member nations and 20 associate members of regional commissions, representing almost 20% of UN member states.

2. There are 193 Member States to the United Nations. See a full list on the High Seas Alliance Ratification Tracker.

3. ‘SIDS leadership in the Race for Ratification - action to protect marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction’ was organized by the governments of Antigua and Barbuda, Maldives, and Vanuatu, with the High Seas Alliance.

4. Find out more about the #RaceForRatification and track countries’ progress on the High Seas Alliance Ratification Tracker. Read more about the High Seas Treaty in this factsheet and FAQs.

5. Signing does not establish consent for States to be bound to the Treaty, but it does express the willingness of the signatory State to continue the treaty-making process and for it to proceed to ratification. Signing also creates an obligation to refrain, in good faith, from acts that would defeat the object and the purpose of the Treaty.

Ratification is when nations formally consent to the new international law, and this often entails ensuring that their national laws are consistent with it. The speed and process to ratify varies by country. In some countries, the act of ratification is simply a Leader’s decree, while in others Parliamentary approval is needed.

6. On 21 May 2024, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Seas ruling - an "advisory opinion" - said emissions from fossil fuels and other planet-warming gases that are absorbed by the ocean count as marine pollution and that countries must go beyond the requirements of the 2015 Paris Agreement to protect the marine environment and the States that depend on it.

For further information about the High Seas Treaty please read our Media Pack.

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www.highseasalliance.org