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2020: a “super year” for the ocean?

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After the “Blue COP”, whose real political impacts will need to be assessed beyond the strong mobilisation of civil society, 2020 is presented as a “super year” for the ocean, marked with several important events and political deadlines on the horizon. But what can we really expect? And what would a successful 2020 look like for ocean conservation?

For several months, the phrase has been repeated like a mantra: 2020 will be a “super year” for the ocean. It is indeed true that this year will present many opportunities to strengthen multilateral cooperation on marine issues, and it would be a mistake to miss this opportunity to respond politically to the dire warnings recently issued by IPBES

and the IPCC. Yet the ocean agenda for 2020 is a mixed bag, containing a range of different processes, with diverse mandates, goals and deadlines. It is therefore crucial to understand the nuances and set our priorities and expectations accordingly.

Firstly, some events will be strategic and political in nature. This is the case of the [United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 14](#), which will be held in Lisbon from 2 to 6 June. Picking up where the first edition left off in 2017, the goal will be to both [assess the implementation of SDG 14 and to identify new ways to promote its application](#). Beyond a list of “voluntary commitments”—a tool increasingly used in high-level conferences, but whose real value remains questionable—the conference should close with a “brief, concise, action-oriented and intergovernmentally agreed declaration focusing on, and highlighting, the science-based and innovative areas of action to support the implementation of Goal 14”. Although the term “action” is mentioned twice here, any such declaration will, by its nature, focus on defining a shared vision. We must hope that this vision will be sufficiently ambitious and relevant to inspire action, rather than simply add yet another political declaration to the litany of empty promises. In this respect, the focus should not be on specific tools to protect the marine environment, which are already readily available, but on the sectoral policies that have increasingly harmful impacts on the ocean (e.g. agriculture, industry and fisheries). It is also to be hoped that the final text be endorsed at the highest level, ensuring that all actors are held accountable – not just environment ministries.

The [Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework is also seeking to define a strategic vision for future action](#). The Framework is to be adopted during the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CDB), which will be held in October 2020 in Kunming, China. In particular, the Framework aims to renew the now-expired Aichi Targets (2010-2020), many of which were not met. The ocean is occupying its rightful place in the discussion, with negotiations focussing on setting a target for marine protected area coverage (30% by 2030?) and the protection of specific ecosystems (like emblematic coral reefs and mangroves). But history shows that setting ambitious objectives is not a cure-all to save biodiversity, and the other [pillars of the Kunming agreement](#) therefore need to be robust enough to slow or even reverse the current biodiversity loss, including by addressing the underlying causes and sectoral policies that contribute to it.

Beyond these major events, expectations also—and perhaps especially—concern the conclusion of two long-running intergovernmental negotiation processes. Firstly, the high seas—which covers nearly half of the Earth’s surface and does not belong to any one nation—could become subject to a dedicated [legally binding international instrument](#). For almost 15 years, the States have been discussing the [conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in this area](#). All eyes are now on the final round of negotiations at the end of March, as States push to agree on a finalised treaty text. Many believe that additional rounds of negotiations may be needed, but 2020 will nonetheless be an important step towards the future treaty.

The year could also be marked by the conclusion of negotiations on fisheries subsidies, launched in Doha in 2001 in the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO). [A constructive climate of cooperation](#) makes it possible that an agreement “on comprehensive and effective disciplines that prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal [...] fishing” could be adopted during the WTO Ministerial Conference (8-11 June in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan). It is currently estimated that 35 billion dollars are allocated every year to the fisheries sector, [half of which contribute to the overexploitation of resources and three quarters of which go to industrial fleets](#). Such an agreement would therefore be a huge step forward, implementing SDG 14-6, relieving pressure on the ocean, and redirecting financial flows towards more sustainable and equitable practices. Few other decisions to be made in 2020 could have such an immediate positive impact.

We will also be closely following: the [IUCN World Conservation Congress](#), where the debates are often rich and the resolutions sometimes precursors of developments in international law and policy; the Draft Regulations on Exploitation of Mineral Resources in the Area, which aim to regulate seabed mining—a growing concern to scientists and NGOs; discussions on a possible treaty on marine plastics, whose potential added value is still unclear; the regular [Our Ocean](#) conference, which appears to be losing steam with every edition; the growing interest in developing shipping routes in the Arctic; the promises of a European Green Deal, which is yet to be reflected in [fisheries policy](#); and COP26 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Glasgow, which could prove to be the true “Blue COP” if States increase their ambition in terms of greenhouse gas emissions reductions—a prerequisite for limiting the impacts of climate change on the ocean and the populations that depend on it.

An eventful year therefore lies ahead of us, but the ocean is indifferent to our conferences and declarations. We must therefore reflect on the achievements of the coming year in light of agreements adopted and action taken, rather than promises made. In this respect, an Agreement in Nur-Sultan that gives guarantees for the removal of subsidies contributing to the overexploitation of fish stocks in the near future, a COP26 that drives an increase in climate ambition towards a level consistent with the objective of the Paris Agreement, and the adoption of a treaty on the high seas would certainly make 2020 a “super year” for the ocean.

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