



After the Fact | The Treaty That Could Save the Ocean

Originally aired December 12, 2025

Total runtime: 00:10:17

TRANSCRIPT

Roger-Mark De Souza, vice president of environment, The Pew Charitable Trusts: There is excitement in the air. New York City is bustling.

Emily Chow, host, “After the Fact” podcast: When 60 countries ratified and you reached that threshold, how did you feel?

Liz Karan, director, ocean governance, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Almost disbelief. And joy.

Roger-Mark De Souza: Now that 60 nations have ratified this momentous agreement, we have an opportunity to safeguard the world’s oceans.

Emily Chow: You’re hearing from Roger-Mark De Souza, VP of environment at Pew, who was in New York for the 60th ratification of the high seas treaty, which triggered the process for the agreement to enter into force. Welcome to “After the Fact” for The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Emily Chow.

The ocean covers about 71% of the Earth’s surface and produces about half of the oxygen on the planet. But despite its role in supporting life on Earth, much of the ocean has remained unprotected—until now. In September, and after more than 20 years of effort, Morocco became the 60th country to ratify the U.N. high seas treaty. This was the magic number needed for the treaty to take effect, and the anchor of our episode today. This landmark agreement will help protect marine life on the high seas well beyond national borders. And as of this recording, 75 countries have ratified the treaty, but that number continues to grow. I’m joined today by my colleague, Liz Karan.

Liz Karan: In college, I was really interested in oceanography and world politics. So this is my dream job.

Emily Chow: Liz leads Pew’s work on ocean governance. Her team offers technical guidance and recommendations to advance protections for marine life. They work with scientists who examine the effects of things like deep-sea mining and promoting fair sharing of ocean resources.



Emily Chow: Hi, Liz, welcome to “After the Fact.” So tell me: Why is the high seas treaty such a huge win for the planet?

Liz Karan: The official name of the high seas treaty is “For the Protection and Conservation of Marine Biodiversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction.” The 60th country ratified in September, which triggers entry into force of the agreement. So this is the realization of two decades-plus of advocacy, governments’ negotiation, scientific information coming to the front, creating an urgency for the need to protect the oceans. So that treaty will officially enter into force in January of 2026, and is really designed to ensure that there’s a healthy ocean overall, which makes for a healthy planet.

Emily Chow: Before we get into the details of the implementation and what the treaty means, let’s take a step back. Can you explain what the high seas are?

Liz Karan: The high seas, as I said, the areas beyond national jurisdiction, are beyond the horizon. So when you’re standing on the beach looking out to the horizon, you’re still not even looking at the high seas. It’s technically 200 nautical miles from the coastline and because of that, it’s just very hard for people to conceptualize. We know more about the moon than we do about the deepest parts of the ocean. So it is an area that hasn’t received a lot of scientific attention and public attention. And so it’s been hard to really galvanize momentum around addressing the threats to marine conservation.

Emily Chow: What are some of the risks currently facing the ocean?

Liz Karan: More fishing boats on the water, taking fewer and fewer fish. But also, increasingly, the ocean is a busy space. So, in addition to overfishing, you have the potential threat of future deep-seabed mining, you have shipping activities, which creates noise pollution that impacts the acoustic navigability for marine life. You know, what we’ve seen over these last 20 years coincide with an increasing understanding about the plight of the oceans and the urgency and the need to protect it.

Emily Chow: So it’s been somewhat of like an education process, the science meeting people and bringing them along. And when we can create the marine protected areas, there’s been a lot of success when we’re looking at the health of the ocean. Is that right?

Liz Karan: Absolutely. Marine protected areas have a proven track record within national waters of protecting not just the biodiversity within those areas but also creating spillover effects into other areas helping to regenerate fish populations or feeding grounds that benefit migratory species that come in and out of those protected areas. And the idea here is to enable this conservation tool to be used in the high seas and to replicate those biodiversity benefits outside of national jurisdiction. You know, this concept of national jurisdiction, they’re just really lines on a map.



Liz Karan: The tuna, the sharks, the rays, the dolphins, they don't know if they're in national waters or international waters. And so really what it's designed to do is enable more holistic and connective approach to conservation management—not just for the wildlife themselves, but also for people that, you know, depend on these species for food or for tourism and sustainable economies. It's been said that the ocean is responsible for every second breath that we take in terms of oxygen generation. So a healthy ocean is beneficial for everyone.

Emily Chow: And seems like with this treaty, there's a big emphasis on collaboration. You know, it's funny, I think about the workplace environment and how sometimes it's really difficult just to coordinate six people in a meeting. I can't imagine 60-plus countries and getting everyone on board. And so talk a little bit about what that implementation is looking like in the future.

Liz Karan: I'm pleased to share that there are currently 75 countries that have ratified the agreement. So even since September, we've had 15 additional countries sign up for the treaty. And given that the high seas are two-thirds of the world's ocean, which is half the planet, it really requires universal participation. The hope and the goal by entry into force in 2026 is that every country will have a seat at the table here.

But to your question around implementation, the treaty provides a legal mechanism for establishing high seas marine protected areas, as well as safeguards for assessing environmental impacts of things like deep-seabed mining as well as ensuring that developing countries have the resources that they need to implement the agreement.

But one of the really innovative things that the treaty does is recognizing the role of traditional knowledge and the importance of traditional knowledge of Indigenous people in local communities in helping us understand what is going on in the oceans. And bringing forward, and providing mechanisms to bring forward, those knowledge holders into the international process of considering areas for protection and better understanding what are potential impacts and threats to the oceans.

And lastly, but not least, addressing the commercialization and benefit sharing around marine genetic resources.

Emily Chow: Marine genetic resources are things like DNA and enzymes that come from ocean plants and animals. They can be used to make everyday items like cosmetics, or potentially lifesaving things like medications. But as Liz mentioned, we've only explored a small part of the ocean, so we don't know what kinds of discoveries are still out there. And as technology advances, scientists will be able to learn more about marine genetic resources in ways they couldn't before. And the treaty will help ensure that everyone gets a share.



Emily Chow: Pew has a vested interest in ocean conservation for a lot of the reasons you described. When it comes to participating in the global stage, with so many stakeholders at the table, what is our organization's role?

Liz Karan: We are an official civil society observer to different U.N. processes. And we've played a really significant role in helping to provide technical advice to governments, helping to explain to the media and other public audiences the importance of this agreement as well as the importance of the high seas, bringing forward and working with scientists and economists to show that the benefits that a treaty like this will bring forward.

Emily Chow: We don't have a crystal ball here at Pew, but thinking about what success looks like five to 10 years from now, what comes to your mind?

Liz Karan: Given all the environmental challenges that the planet is facing, governments did commit several years ago to Target 3 under the global biodiversity framework, which calls for protecting at least 30% of the world's oceans. So we shorthand that by calling it "30 by 30." And there's a real opportunity with this treaty to help support that global goal. So I would hope in the next few years that the treaty will be up and running and be able to play its part in helping the globe achieve 30 by 30.

Emily Chow: One last question for you, Liz. What are you looking forward to in continuing this work?

Liz Karan: You know, I started working on this project here at Pew around 2015, 2016. Those negotiations started in the basement of the U.N. in conference rooms that did not have any windows. So literally no light of day. And I think, you know—and to see that now on the world stage it's being celebrated in New York, very publicly, I think goes to show how far this issue has come.

One of the positive things about this treaty is that it's one of the few bright spots for multilateral cooperation. And I think what we can hope to do is to keep that light alive by focusing on what we can do collectively as the international community to support our planet, which is our common heritage. That's why people should care. It's really making sure that oceans are a safe home, not just for the animals that live there, but also for us.

Emily Chow: Thanks for listening. Make sure you're subscribed to "After the Fact" wherever you get your podcasts to hear all of our latest episodes. We're taking a short break for the holidays, and we'll come back in the new year, with new content. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Emily Chow, and this is "After the Fact."