Deep-sea mining: growing support for a moratorium

Concerns over the environmental impacts of deep-sea mining have led to increasing support for a moratorium. Opposition to deep-sea mining continues to grow among a wide array of actors, including States, Parliamentarians, local governments, scientists, the finance sector, the automotive and tech industries, Indigenous leaders and communities, fishers, and youth.

The reasons behind the calls for a moratorium range from uncertainties over the full extent of the risks due to the lack of scientific information and warnings from scientists of the “irreversible” environmental damage that would be caused, to questions over the technical capability and accountability of the relevant authorities to properly manage mining contractors, and false claims by industry and politicians that the minerals required for a just, green transition need to be sourced from the deep sea (Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, 2021; Alberts, 2022).

The absence of a coherent, effective international governance system to safeguard the marine environment, along with insufficient evidence of the net benefit deep-sea mining could have for humankind, underline that the high risks associated with deep-sea mining outweigh the potential benefits.

Support for a moratorium has come from the following:

**Scientific leaders**

More than 750 leading marine science and policy experts from over 44 countries 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 irreversibly destroy seafloor ecosystems, create plumes of sediment that obstruct the breathing systems of marine animals, release toxic metals, and cause harmful noise, vibrations and light pollution. Scientists also warn that strip-mining the deep could impact carbon sequestration dynamics and deep-ocean carbon storage in ways that we do not yet fully comprehend (Chin & Hari, 2022; Amon, Anderson & Levin, 2022).

“[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.”

Professor Alex Rogers, August 2019

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“Caprella septentrionalis. © Alexandr Semonov

“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
“Deep sea mining is environmental vandalism and would wreak permanent havoc on marine life and coastlines...At a time when we are facing climate and biodiversity crises, we simply cannot allow this.”
Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, Member of Parliament and co-leader of the Māori Party in Aotearoa New Zealand

**Governments**

In light of the uncertainties and high stakes related to deep-sea mining, a growing number of world leaders, and national and international institutions, are deciding that supporting deep-sea mining violates their political commitments and obligations to protect the marine environment.

In September 2021, IUCN members at the World Conservation Congress voted overwhelmingly in favor of a moratorium on deep-sea mining and a reform of the International Seabed Authority (ISA). Eighty-one percent of the States and ninety-five percent of the NGOs present supported the call. Since the adoption of IUCN Resolution 122, the momentum for governments supporting a pause or halt to deep-sea mining within international and national waters has continued to grow.

To date, the governments calling for a moratorium on deep-sea mining in international waters include:
- **The European Parliament** has repeatedly called on the European Commission and EU Member States and all other States to promote a moratorium in both domestic and international waters (2018, 2021, 2022, 2024).
- **Palau** is calling for a moratorium in international waters (2022) and has prohibited deep-sea mining in national waters (2020).
- **Fiji** is calling for a moratorium in international waters (2022) and has enacted a moratorium within national waters (2019).
- **Samoa** is calling for a moratorium in international waters (2022).
- **The Federated States of Micronesia** is calling for a moratorium in international waters (2022).
- **Chile** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2022).
- **Costa Rica** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2022).
- **Ecuador** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2022).
- **Spain** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2022). Within Spain, the Parliaments of the Canary Islands (2021), Galicia (2021) and Catalonia (2023) have each called for a moratorium in international waters and prohibited deep-sea mining within national waters.
- **New Zealand** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2022). The New Zealand Supreme Court ruled against a seabed mining proposal in its territorial waters due to potential negative and unknown impacts on the marine environment (2021).
- **Germany** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2022).
- **Panama** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2022).
- **France** is calling for a ban in international waters (2022). The French Parliament adopted a resolution prohibiting deep-sea mining within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and overseas territories (2023).
  - **French Polynesia** enacted a ban on deep-sea mining in territorial waters (2022).
  - **New Caledonia’s** Congress is poised to adopt a 10 year moratorium in their entire EEZ (2022).
- **Vanuatu** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023) and will not allow deep-sea mining within their jurisdiction (2023).
- **The Dominican Republic** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).
- **Switzerland** is calling for a moratorium in international waters (2023).
- **Sweden** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).
- **Ireland** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).
- **Canada** is calling for a moratorium in international waters (2023).
- **Brazil** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).
- **Finland** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).
- **Portugal** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).
- **Monaco** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).
- **The United Kingdom** is calling for a moratorium in international waters (2023).
- **Mexico** is calling for a precautionary pause in international waters (2023).

Furthermore, a growing number of governments have enacted deep-sea mining moratoriums or prohibitions within national, state, territorial and/or domestic waters. These include:
- **United States:**
  - Oregon (1991), Washington (2021) and California (2022) have all enacted moratoriums on deep-sea mining within state waters.
  - Guam has called on the ISA to enact a moratorium in international waters and has called for the US government to enact a moratorium within its EEZ (2021).
- In **Australia**, the Northern Territory has permanently banned deep-sea mining within state waters (2021).
- **Canada** effectively confirmed a moratorium on deep-sea mining within its EEZ due to the absence of a rigorous national regulatory structure (2023).
in Mañale, Ahupua‘a/Maui Nui Makai Network addressing delegates at the 28th ISA Council Meeting in March 2023

Farreid glass sponges in the foreground of this fairly high-density sponge community found at about 2,360 meters depth. © NOAA

The ocean is our country and we come from the deepest depths of the seas.”

Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous cultures across the Pacific and elsewhere around the world consider the ocean to be a sacred space for creation, a provider, an ancestor, and a link to places and people across the horizon. The Pacific and its communities are on the frontline of deep-sea mineral exploration and could be the first to feel the impacts of mining, if it is ever permitted to start. For these reasons, coastal people across the Pacific have led the charge for a ban on deep-sea mining through action at home and at international fora.

Until recently, Indigenous and Pacific voices did not have a platform at ISA meetings to express their views, despite the significant impact deep-sea mining could have on their future. Finally, in March 2023, Indigenous representatives took the floor at the ISA and expressed their concerns. To date, at least 56 Indigenous groups from over 34 countries have called for a total ban on deep-sea mining, with many others speaking out against the destructive industry and calling for a moratorium.

- In Portugal, the Azores approved a resolution that will prohibit deep-sea mining within domestic waters until 2050 (2023).
- The Solomon Islands, through the Melanesian Spearhead Group, will not allow deep-sea mining to take place within their jurisdiction (2023).
- Papua New Guinea, through the Melanesian Spearhead Group, will not allow deep-sea mining to take place within their jurisdiction (2023).

Businesses and financial institutions

Leading global companies have announced their support for a global moratorium on deep-sea mining. Companies including BMW Group, Samsung SDI, Google, Renault Group, Rivian, Volkswagen Group, Patagonia, Volvo Group, and several others 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 are either following suit or explicitly distancing themselves from deep-sea metals in their procurement policies and/or investment policies, such as Microsoft, Ford, Daimler, General Motors, and Tiffany & Co.

Several financial institutions have also voiced their support for a moratorium on deep-sea mining, including: ABN AMRO, BBVA, Cooperative Bank, Lloyds Banking Group, NatWest (previously Bank of Scotland), Standard Chartered Bank, Triodos Bank, and the European Investment Bank.

A 2022 UNEP Finance Initiative report supports the decision of businesses and financial institutions to not finance or participate in deep-sea mining activities and instead call for a moratorium, by concluding that “there is no foreseeable way in which financing of deep-sea mining activities can be viewed as consistent with the Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles”.

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The fishing industry

In May 2019, the EU’s Long Distance (Fishing) Fleet Advisory Council 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 jointly with the Pelagic and North Western Waters Advisory Council in November 2021. Since then, other fisheries groups have joined the moratorium call, including the International Pole and Line Foundation, the Norwegian Fisheries Association, the South Africa Tuna Association, the South African Hake Long Line Association, the Locally Managed Marine Areas Network (LMMA), the African Confederation of Professional Artisanal Fishing Organizations (CAOPA), and the Coalition of Artisanal Fisherwomen of Latin America.

Civil society groups

A wide range of civil society groups have called on the international community to introduce a moratorium on deep-sea mining. These include:

- 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).
- The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, an alliance of over 100 international organizations (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 (January 2020).
- Civil society, fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples, and philanthropic organizations in the RISE UP Blue Call to Action (February 2020).
- Amnesty International (February 2021).
- The Responsible Mining Foundation (June 2021).
- The Pacific Blue Line collective, which has been endorsed by over 100 organizations (August 2021).

Furthermore, members of the general public continue to raise their voices against deep-sea mining. Two separate petitions, one hosted by Greenpeace and the other by Only One, have together garnered over 800,000 signatures in support of a moratorium against deep-sea mining.

Recommendations

Widespread concern about the vulnerability of deep-sea habitats and ecosystems, the potential climate impacts, the scale and nature of proposed mining practices, the lack of information to conduct a thorough environmental impact assessment, the potential impacts on Indigenous and coastal communities, and the deficiencies in the ISA as a regulatory body come together to create a clear case for a moratorium on deep-sea mining.

Instead of opening a vast new frontier of industrial mining in the deep sea, efforts should be channeled into our transition towards a more circular, environmentally and socially responsible model of production, consumption, and reuse of raw materials, as the basis for our transition to an economy fueled by renewable energy.

References


This does not include a plethora of other petitions in countries across the world where the public is speaking out against this destructive industry.