Executive summary

In 2022, the world's nations committed to **effectively conserve at least 30% of the Earth's land and ocean by 2030** under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). This **30x30** global target is the most ambitious conservation commitment ever made and a critical step toward addressing the dual challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

In short, we are failing to meet the 30x30 target. Countries must conserve more of their national waters and work together to increase the protection of the vast area of international waters beyond their borders (high seas). Moreover, the conservation of the ocean must be more 'effective', meaning with higher quality standards and regulation, to achieve the intended biodiversity outcomes outlined in the GBF. Importantly, the work must not stop when the 30x30 target is met. Once reached, we will be in a stronger position to work toward the GBF's broader ambition of humanity living in harmony with nature by 2050.

This report provides insights into the current status of global ocean conservation (see Annex 1 for information about data and methodologies) and five key recommendations for governments to improve and speed up action for ocean conservation. The recommendations are designed to inform discussion at the **COP16 UN Biodiversity Conference in October 2024**.

Putting these **five key recommendations** high on the agenda will make reaching the 30x30 target with *effective protection* in place achievable. And it is in the interests of governments to do so. Research shows that effectively protected marine areas are more likely to deliver the ecological, social, and economic benefits attributed to conservation. Delivering on the 30x30 target is essential to protect the ocean's rich biodiversity, which has intrinsic value beyond human benefit. **By preserving marine ecosystems, we sustain the critical provisions we depend on — such as food supply, climate regulation, and carbon capture — ensuring the health and balance of our planet.**

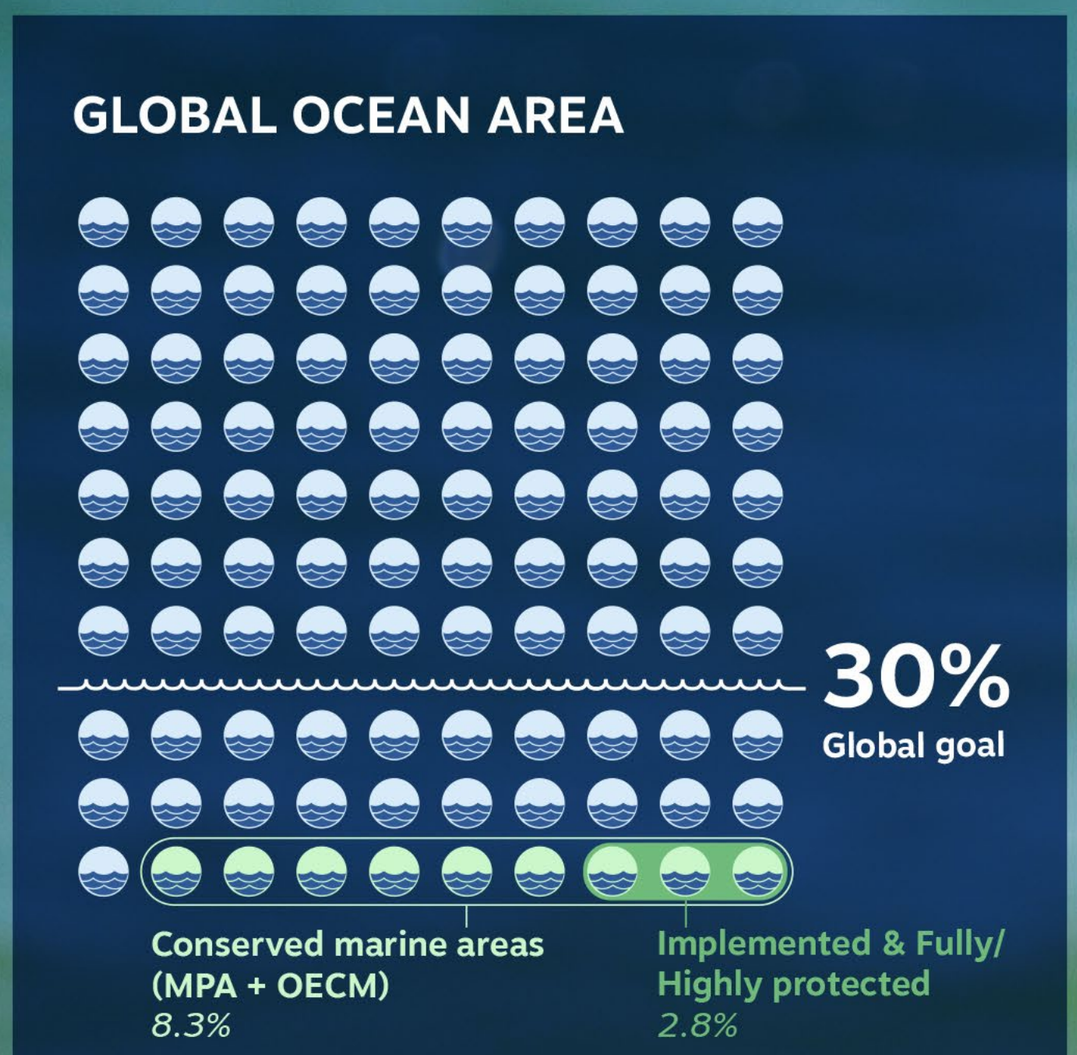

Figure 1 *Current state of global ocean protection. Source: SkyTruth & MPAtlas, August 2024.*

1. Increase the quantity (coverage) of areas under conservation, both in national and international (high seas) waters and establish national marine conservation targets

Only 8.3% of global marine areas are reported as protected (either as MPAs or OECMs). At the current rate of progress — an increase of 0.5% since the adoption of the GBF in 2022 — this figure is **projected to rise to just 9.7% by 2030.** It is clear we need to accelerate efforts to protect marine areas if we are to achieve the 30x30 target and halt and reverse nature loss in the long term. Countries must protect more of their **national waters** and work together to expand protection in the vast **international waters** beyond their borders (high seas).

Countries need to protect more of the marine areas within their national waters, which extend up to 200 nautical miles from the coastline. In these zones, coastal countries hold special rights to explore and manage marine resources. **Only 14 countries have reported more than 30% of their waters as protected areas:** Monaco, Palau, United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, New Zealand,[1] Australia, Argentina, Germany, Chile, Colombia, Belgium, France, Seychelles and the Netherlands. With just six years left to achieve the 30% global target, countries must significantly increase their commitments and actions within their national waters. While 30x30 is a global target, countries need to set their own national targets outlining their contribution to the global effort. Currently, the targets set by countries are lacking in ambition, both in their National Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plans (NBSAPs) and other national policies. **To accelerate action on a global scale, countries must set more ambitious targets on the national level.**

The creation of new MPAs requires careful planning and consideration of ecological conditions. MPAs should for instance be large enough to **reduce edge effects,** and networks of MPAs should ensure **adequate representation of ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity,** and **promote ecological connectivity.** Moreover, efforts should be made to **regenerate degraded marine ecosystems** in busy and industrialized regions, rather than just focusing on biodiversity hotspots in remote places. Establishing MPAs in high-extraction zones is particularly relevant for recovering sustainable fish stocks and for climate change mitigation and resilience.

We cannot reach the 30x30 target without significant area-based protections in the high seas. These are the parts of the open ocean that lie beyond the boundaries of any one country, and cover two thirds of the ocean and nearly half of the planet. Yet, so far only about 1.4% of the high seas is under some form of protection — and considering effective protection, this drops to less than 1%. T*he High Seas Treaty,* formally known as the *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ)*, once entered into force, will establish a legal framework for creating protected areas in international waters, closing a major gap in global ocean governance. Securing the 60 ratifications for the Treaty to become international law is a necessary first step in building the institutions needed to conserve the high seas, including an equitable financial mechanism for governance of these waters. Next, governments will need to work together to identify, develop, and resource protected areas.

Only 8.3% of global marine areas are protected

[1] New Zealand protects over 30% of its waters when including Niue and the Cook Islands—an independent country and a self-governing territory, respectively, in free association with New Zealand. Without them, the protection coverage of New Zealand's domestic waters stands at just 28%.

2. Improve the quality of marine conservation (implement effective protection)

Simply designating areas for protection is not enough. Actual success in achieving the GBF's biodiversity conservation targets depends on the quality of the protection in these areas, otherwise termed as *effective protection*. This means there is regulation and active management in place that ensures minimal or no damaging practices — such as industrial fishing, mining, and oil and gas development — allowing desired conservation outcomes to be achieved. This report reveals that, two years on from the adoption of the GBF, **just 2.8% of the world's marine areas have been assessed as likely to deliver effective protection,**[2] underscoring the urgent need for more meaningful conservation efforts (SkyTruth & MPAtlas, 2024).

This gap between coverage and effectiveness is a recurring issue, even in regions making the most progress toward the 30% target. For instance, while Latin America and the Caribbean appear to lead in marine conservation, with 26.6% of ocean designated as MPAs, only 2.5% has been assessed as likely effectively protected. The remaining 24% has either a very low protection level or was unassessed against *The MPA Guide*.[3] North America has protected 22.3% of marine areas, but only 17% has been assessed as likely to be effective. Europe has protected 23.3%, but only 7.4% has been assessed as likely to be effectively protected. On a country level, only two nations have effectively protected more than 30% of their waters: the UK (38.9%) and Palau (77.9%).

However, in examining the **UK case study** (see page 36), we see that **effective protection occurs only in its overseas territories, highlighting a clear gap between coverage and effectiveness in its domestic waters.** Although 47% of the UK's domestic waters are designated as MPAs, almost none (<0.1%) of the assessed areas are effectively protected. This is largely a result of a 'features-based' approach, whereby only specific features or species are protected within an MPA rather than the whole ecosystem. Consequently, more than half of these MPAs still allow destructive fishing methods such as bottom trawling.

***Effective protection,* not just coverage, should be a high priority**

Effective protection, not just coverage, should be a priority for expanding protection of marine biodiversity under the 30x30 target, including ensuring sites are at least implemented or actively managed and are highly or fully protected. This applies to both existing and future MPAs, many of which lack high quality standards and strong enforcement.

3. Support Indigenous Peoples and local communities

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs) have fundamental roles to play and should be at the forefront of marine conservation. Marine protection efforts should support, not displace, IPs and LCs, who have often developed sustainable practices and are key stewards of biodiversity. Governments must recognize and restore the rights of IPs and ensure they have free, prior and informed consent regarding decisions made about their waters and land. These groups should be enabled to create and manage marine conservation areas respective of their distinct rights. Decision-makers should incorporate traditional management practices to ensure that conservation is culturally appropriate and aligned with local values. By grounding management strategies in traditional knowledge, either independently or alongside modern science, conservation can be more effective and respectful of the communities it aims to benefit.

National governments should direct resources to include and support IPs and LCs, recognizing their knowledge of the biodiversity they sustain.

[2] See figure 3 for details on effectiveness assessment
[3] See Annex 1 for details on methodology

4. Unlock sufficient and durable (international) finance

Effective protection of biodiversity relies on capacity building, stakeholder engagement, management, scientific research, and monitoring, all of which depend on adequate, continuous funding. **Currently, governments allocate about $68 billion yearly toward biodiversity, but to reach the CBD's target of $200 billion annually from all sources by 2030, they must mobilize more resources.** While each country is responsible for allocating adequate resources to manage protected areas, some degree of redistribution is necessary to meet global conservation goals. Wealthier nations must contribute their fair share to support countries with fewer resources, fulfilling their commitments and enabling better governance of protected areas. Under the GBF, developed countries have committed to deliver at least $20 billion per year to developing countries by 2025 and $30 billion by 2030. Currently, this commitment is not being met. Furthermore, **the quality of financing is essential;** finance should be affordable and accessible, prioritize biodiversity as the primary goal, and be fairly distributed to and focused on those local institutions and communities that manage protected areas.

5. Improve reporting and data collection

To effectively monitor progress toward the 30x30 target, standardized data collection is essential. Current self-reported data often includes areas that are not implemented or lack effective protection. To address this, decision-makers should refer to *The MPA Guide* to determine appropriate protection levels tailored to specific local contexts. Moreover, comprehensive reporting should go further. For the 30x30 target to truly achieve biodiversity conservation, MPA coverage must be effective, representative, well-connected, and equitable. Therefore, combining critical, reliable datasets that provide metrics for each of these components is central to holistically understand progress and to create a path forward.

Finance should be affordable and accessible, and prioritize biodiversity as the primary goal.