

GREATER ENFORCEMENT, COLLABORATION NEEDED IN INTERNATIONAL MARINE TREATIES: OCEAN WISE REPORT

Vancouver, B.C. – Covering more than 40 per cent of the Earth’s surface, the high seas are an expansive common area, and access to its resources of international interest. More than 500 internationally recognized environmental agreements, on issues ranging from overfishing to oil dumping, have been signed over the last five decades. However, according to a new research paper authored by Ocean Wise seafood specialist Dr. Dalal Al-Abdulrazzak, the plethora of multilateral marine treaties is a potential threat to marine conservation as nations are overwhelmed by and unable to meet their various commitments.

The paper, [*Opportunities for improving global marine conservation through multilateral treaties*](#), had three co-authors. It will appear in the December issue of Marine Policy and an advance version is now available online.

“At face value, the rapid growth in the number of treaties being signed between nations appears to be encouraging. Unfortunately, the reality is that many of them were created in response to immediate crises and are failing to fulfill their longer-term mission,” said Dr. Al-Abdulrazzak. “In a sense, there is treaty fatigue — too many commitments have been made and without the infrastructure in place to ensure these treaties are actually effective. We determined a number of learnings from the few successful agreements that should be considered for future ones.”

The report notes that in July 2017 the United Nations General Assembly finalized plans for its members to negotiate a new agreement targeting human activity and its impact on common resources in the high seas. To date, the majority of treaties (51 per cent) deal with fisheries, 30 per cent deal with pollution, four per cent with marine mammals and 15 per cent with other topics.

Dr. Al-Abdulrazzak examines the successful implementation of certain treaties, pointing out that some agreements on marine mammals have had positive results; the paper credits the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling as being a key factor in reducing commercial whaling and the removal of the humpback whale from the U.S. endangered species list. Existing treaties on marine pollution, too, have proven effective and worldwide oil pollution from ships has decreased steadily since 1973, while unregulated dumping has largely ceased as well.

Fish stocks, on the other hand, are not seeing the same benefits from current treaties in place. Two thirds of fish stocks on the high seas and under oversight from a Regional Fisheries Management Organization are overfished and/or depleted.^[1] Despite decades of multilateral treaties, several stocks continue to decline.

Vital to a treaty’s success, the paper posits, are the enforcement mechanisms in place, including greater fines to deter non-compliance, as well as use of scientific committees and secretariats. The findings show that only 9 per cent of multilateral treaties have the infrastructure in place necessary to be

^[1] Cullis-Suzuki, S. and Pauly, D. *Failing the high seas: A global evaluation of regional fisheries management organizations*, Marine Policy. (2010) 1036-1042

effective. These measures will also help prevent the development of “empty treaties”, which are ones that look good on paper but do little to achieve the stated goals.

“With the UN announcing their plans to begin drafting a new agreement, there’s a great opportunity to examine lessons learned, filling any gaps and putting in place stricter enforcement measures. Ultimately all parties have the same objectives — to conserve our shared marine resources — but it will require considering the collective more so than most treaties to date,” said Dr. Al-Abdulrazzak.

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^[1] Cullis-Suzuki, S. and Pauly, D. *Failing the high seas: A global evaluation of regional fisheries management organizations*, Marine Policy. (2010) 1036-1042