

Exploring Opportunities & Implications for Scientists under the BBNJ Agreement: A Roundtable Discussion

Overview

Members of the Deep-Ocean Stewardship Initiative (DOSI) hosted an informal roundtable discussion with deep-sea coral scientists at the International Symposium on Deep-Sea Corals to discuss the new international agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ) and what it may mean for the scientific community. The event aimed to provide a space for open-dialogue, in order to identify the potential benefits and challenges, as well as informational needs.



The discussion began with a series of opening remarks on the background of the BBNJ process (Christine Gaebel, DOSI, University of Edinburgh), as well as challenges and opportunities for area-based management tools (ABMTs) (Bernadette Butfield, DOSI, RSPB), issues pertaining to benefit sharing (Erik Cordes, DOSI, Temple University), and equitable research partnerships (Elisa Morgera, University of Strathclyde).

Summary of Discussions

Opportunities

Opportunities under the BBNJ agreement were explored, with participants emphasising the need to operationalise an effective Agreement and highlighting its provisions on transparency and equity. Participants recognised the opportunity for a shift in power dynamics, enabling greater engagement of the Global South in deep-sea research activities in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ). They also stressed the importance of moving from technology transfer to participatory and equitable technology co-development. Benefit sharing was a crucial aspect discussed, with discussants drawing examples from different contexts such as Alaska's benefit sharing system for oil and gas extraction and New Zealand's levy system for fisheries. Participants raised questions about how benefit sharing can better support the Global South and emphasised the need for equitable and needs-based capacity building in these areas, including through non-monetary benefits. Some participants highlighted that funds could and should be used beyond simply funding science. The establishment of finance mechanisms under the BBNJ agreement was seen as an opportunity to channel resources to where they are most needed, but it was recognised that there will be challenges in this regard.

Regarding opportunities to engage with the BBNJ Agreement, participants were asked to identify parts of the Agreement that they believed their research would be useful to decision-makers (Figure 1). All participants felt that their expertise could be useful in some way to BBNJ decision-makers, with many particularly noting the importance of their research and/or expertise for Environmental Impact Assessments, including Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs).

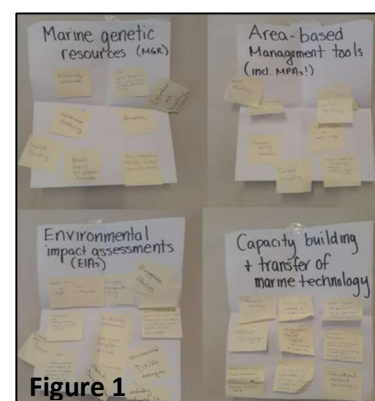


Figure 1

Barriers

The roundtable also addressed potential barriers and. Funding emerged as a significant challenge, not only for scientific research but also for supporting developing and least developed states in fully engaging with the Agreement. Participants emphasised the importance of long-term investment in scientific endeavours, such as research stations, laboratory resources, and trained staff, to avoid parachute science or one-off projects. They also recognised the existence of knowledge gaps that could hinder the full implementation of the BBNJ Agreement, including the undertaking of SEAs. It was highlighted that DOSI has a wide-range of expertise across its membership and that collating knowledge gaps pertaining to BBNJ could be a useful exercise. One knowledge gap that was identified was around vertical connectivity. Participants discussed the importance of understanding the connection between benthic and pelagic environments, particularly in the context of designating ABMTs. It was highlighted that this would require cross-discipline collaboration and was another area where DOSI could utilise its vast breadth of expertise. Examples such as the "Deepwater Horizon" project were cited to showcase ongoing efforts to study connectivity, although challenges remain in providing suitable evidence for decision-makers due to the reliance on models in the deep-sea domain. Indeed, a wider-discussion was had regarding the knowledge needed in order to improve the accuracy of models. The need for more accurate models was discussed, with participants noting its importance for effective management and protection. While participants acknowledged the importance of using models, they emphasised the need to invest in research that can ground-truth these models. By combining modelling with field data, the accuracy and usefulness of the models can be enhanced, providing decision-makers with more reliable information.

In addition, the challenges of monitoring activities in ABNJ and ensuring compliance was highlighted, with a call for increased evidence of activities taking place in ABNJ and the utilisation and development of surveillance technology which might assist. Monitoring, surveillance, and compliance were identified as critical challenges in implementing the BBNJ Agreement. Participants expressed doubts about the effectiveness of many existing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and highlighted concerns about "paper parks" lacking proper enforcement. The question of compliance under the BBNJ agreement was raised, emphasising the need for robust monitoring systems. While tools like surveillance technology and Global Fishing Watch were acknowledged for their role in promoting compliance, there was general consensus around the table that further advancements in monitoring technologies were needed.

Next Steps

Specific questions were raised by participants, which could merit further discussions. These included the implications of the BBNJ Agreement for deep-sea mining and other existing sectoral regimes, modalities and priorities for funding scientific research, and the new rules pertaining to collecting scientific samples in ABNJ. The discussion concluded with suggestions for future webinars and workshops which participants believed would be useful for the scientific community, including topics such as new provisions relating to the collection of marine genetic resources (MGR), exploring interactions between the BBNJ agreement and other conventions and agreements, and vertical connectivity and other knowledge gaps. Overall, the roundtable discussion shed light on the opportunities, barriers, and knowledge gaps associated with the BBNJ Agreement from a scientific community perspective and provided an environment for open-dialogue among participants, paving the way for further exploration of these topics and future collaboration to support the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement.