

New Internationalist

Who owns the sea?

New Internationalist Intermediate Ready Lesson

This lesson:

Speaking

Reading - including jigsaw reading

Writing – an interview



How much do you know?

1/ How many oceans are there?

2/ Can you name them?

3/ How much of the earth's surface do the oceans and sea cover?

4/ How deep are they?

5/ Name some organisms that live in the oceans.

Do you think people care
more now about the oceans
than 30 years ago?
Why? / Why not?

*Now read the next slide to see
what the author thinks*

In 1983 there was a cartoon in The New Yorker magazine. It shows a group of women having coffee. One is saying: 'I don't know why I don't care about the bottom of the ocean, but I don't.' Most people then felt like the same.

Probably more people care now.

In the past, we thought the oceans were empty. Now we know there is a lot of life there. And humans are putting that life in danger. Turtles eat plastic. Whales get ill. Dolphins die when they are caught in fishing nets.

Sea life is beautiful and colourful. There are amazing underwater mountains and plants, and magical flashes of light from fish and animals. Millions of people see these images on television, for example the Blue Planet television series, with David Attenborough. He is now 93 and people treat him like a rock-star.

But, more important, he has helped turn a big space we know little about into something people care about, feel connected to, and might even want to save.

What does this photo show?



Who owns the seas?

Scan the following slide – 30 seconds – to find the percentage of ocean that no-one (or everyone?) owns

Who owns the sea, the water that covers two-thirds of the planet? Can you really draw lines on water and make laws about it?

The idea of an international law of the sea has a long history. In 1609 Dutch legal worker Hugo Grotius wrote 'The Freedom of the Seas or the Right which belongs to the Dutch to take part in the East Indian Trade'. But he wanted to support Dutch trade.

It starts: 'Every nation is free to travel to every other nation and to trade with it.'

In 1982, after ten years of negotiation, there was a new UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III).

This continued Grotius' idea of 'freedom of the seas' but there were more details on national rights and privileges. The area of 'territorial sea' where a country can set laws and control grew from 3 to 12 nautical miles ((1 nautical mile is 1.15 land miles and 1.85 kilometres). Ships from all countries can go through this water. But they cannot fish, cause pollution, practise with weapons and or spy. Submarines have to be on the surface and show their flags.

The 1982 Convention also introduced a new 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The countries on the coast can control and use all natural resources in this area. In some cases it it more than 200 nautical miles.

Most of the seas – 64 per cent of the ocean's surface – are still free for everyone to use.

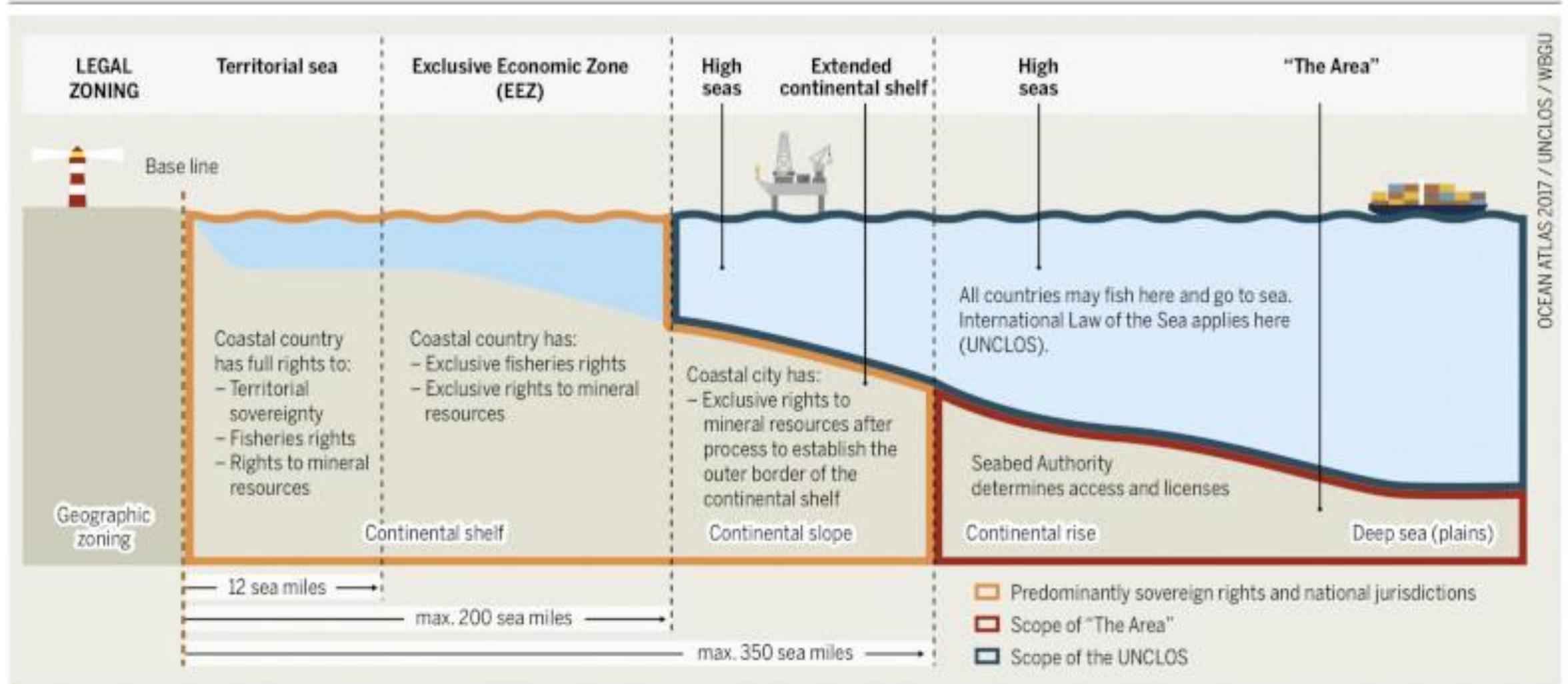
The Convention has been signed by 167 countries and the European Union. The US has never agreed to it. This is strange, because the US often talks about keeping the sea free for all. Also, Iran has not signed.

Now read the slide again more carefully to answer these questions:

- 1) Who first wrote about rights over the ocean - and when - and why?
- 2) When were the first laws about owning the ocean – and who made them – and why?
- 3) What are the laws that exist now? And who has agreed to these laws?

Look at this for 2 minutes then summarise it in pairs:

How the Lawyers Think—Maritime Zones and the International Law of the Sea



Jigsaw reading: in groups of 4, read one each of A/B/C/D, decide on 5 main points, then share



A) Fit for purpose?

At first many people thought the Law of the Sea was a good idea. But many rich countries with coastlines took all the resources and it has not helped poor countries with no coast.

Also, when we make sure most of the sea is 'high seas', free for everyone to use, this means there are no laws, so people can do anything. The international system for registering ships is an important part of the problem. People who make money from this say the system works. But it doesn't.

Under UNCLOS, only flag countries (the main ones are Panama, Liberia, Marshall Islands, Hong Kong and Greece) are legally responsible for their registered ships in international waters. But they don't, or can't, do anything to control their ships or what happens on them. There is no police force for the high seas and no criminal justice system works there.

A recent case shows this: a British teenager said she was raped on a cruise ship with a Panama flag in international waters in the Mediterranean. She could not take this to court because the Spanish court in Valencia, where the ship docked, did not have legal power over the case. The person she said attacked her is free.

B) Problems now Today many experts agree that the Law of the Sea is not good enough. It is not able to do anything about serious problems such as modern slavery on ships, people-trafficking, piracy, overfishing, plastics pollution and climate change. The high seas are mostly an area where weak laws and weak control allow powerful people to destroy and exploit. No-one checks the abuse of human rights.

A few mainly rich countries exploit marine life to make money. They are free to do this by UNCLOS. The Convention includes some duties to conserve living marine resources and protect and preserve the environment, including rare or fragile ecosystems and habitats, but people do not give these ideas much attention. The seas are so big, but now stressed to the limit by many things that humans do. For example, nearly 90 per cent of the world's fish in the sea are now fully exploited, over-exploited or depleted, according to the UN. Many countries now fish in the high seas and the deep seas. So there is a lot of pressure on big fish that migrate and marine animals. The most at risk are sharks, some types of tuna, whales, dolphins and turtles.

Industrial fishing is the worst. When they drag large nets along the bottom of the sea, this destroys the area where many animals and fish live. Only six countries – China, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Spain and North Korea – make up 77 per cent of fishing in the high seas. Industrial high-seas fishing is bad for sea creatures, and it's also bad for humans. There is a lot of modern slavery in the Pacific, where most tuna comes from. Most tuna companies do not check for slavery in the supply chain.

All the newspapers talk about plastics pollution in the sea. Most plastic is waste on land. It goes into the river systems and then into the sea – 12 million tonnes a year. A lot of it is single-use plastic containers and packaging. Ocean currents carry this plastic waste a long way and very deep. A US explorer, Victor Vescovo, recently went down 11 kilometres to the deepest place in the ocean, the Pacific's Mariana Trench. He found a plastic bag and sweet wrappers. The sea creatures are eating plastic. They often think it is food. The problem with plastic is that it can break down into smaller bits, but it lasts forever. Human activity on land creates another growing marine problem – eutrophication. This is the creation of 'dead zones' in the sea, which have no oxygen.

Each summer, a 20,000 square-kilometre dead zone forms in the Gulf of Mexico near the Mississippi Delta. The sea dies because of pig waste and artificial fertilizer from Iowa. Iowa is two thousand kilometres up the Mississippi River. The pig and fertiliser businesses produce so much waste (eg. nitrates and phosphates) and they use a lot of pig waste and fertiliser in farms. The chemicals go into the soil and into the small rivers. Then into the Mississippi-Missouri river system. This ends in the Gulf of Mexico. The chemicals take all the oxygen out of the sea and kill the sea life.

Scientists now know much more about the complicated relationship between the oceans and the atmosphere and how this affects climate change. The ocean is like a very big sponge. It holds 50 times more carbon and carbon dioxide than the atmosphere. It absorbs more than a quarter of the carbon dioxide that humans produce. But all the extra carbon makes the sea acidic when the CO₂ dissolves. This releases hydrogen ions, makes the pH of the sea lower and makes it more acidic. Acidification kills coral reefs – these are the home for 25 per cent of the species in the sea. A healthy sea takes in CO₂ and cools the world, and the many plants in the sea produce a lot of the oxygen we need on land. The sea helps us breathe, but we do not thank it.

We are treating the ocean so badly – as a big dustbin for all types of waste, chemical, nuclear, industrial, shipping, human; as a place we can use and destroy with no thought.

C) Future threats

Oil companies destroy the sea. For example, BP's Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010. We have to stop all new oil exploration in the Arctic and Antarctic.

But what about new projects?

In July there were protests in Kingston, Jamaica. The International Seabed Authority (ISA) had a big meeting. ISA manages the seabed and bottom of the ocean of the high seas. It's trying to organise all the rules for seabed mining by the end of 2020. The protesters wanted a 20-year ban on deep-sea mining.

The ISA wants to do two very different things: protect the seabed and allow people to exploit it. Environmentalists and some marine scientists say it is too close to the mining industry and is not telling the public enough about the risks. The company DeepGreen wants a lot more deep-sea mining at the ISA and is working with the big shipping company Maersk and the mining company Glencore.

Another area that people do not agree about is 'marine bioprospecting'. Many companies are buying patents on different marine products. There are no clear rules on who can get and use the marine genetic resources. And there are problems with who gets the profit.

D) A Global Ocean Treaty Maybe all that will change soon. Representatives from 190 countries are taking part in The Intergovernmental Conference on the Protection of Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), with people from 190 countries. This will prepare for a new Global Ocean Treaty in 2020.

This is a really good chance to look after the oceans. The aim is to develop international laws to protect marine life and habitats in the free high seas. They are talking about many things: planning the effects on the environment of projects; getting more resources to manage and look after the sea; sharing the benefits from marine genetic resources internationally; and developing management tools eg. marine protected areas (MPAs). They need to aim high, change a lot, and manage all this well.

Many organisations that exist now, eg. regional fisheries management organizations, the International Seabed Authority and the International Maritime Organization do not work well. They need to change, and be under good control.

Greenpeace has published a new report with a plan to protect 30 per cent of the world's oceans by 2030. But now we have only achieved half of the plan to protect 10 per cent by 2020.

We must protect at least 30 per cent of the oceans if we want to save them. We can do this by creating a lot of safe ocean areas around the world and protecting these areas from fishing and mining. These areas will look at where sharks and whales live, where underwater mountains and trenches are, and where the fishing and mining are. The plan will look at other changes in the environment, and will find good places (from the temperature of the top of the sea) that will probably change more slowly or adapt better to higher temperatures.

Now, in your groups, try to agree on the answers to these questions:

1/ What is the main purpose of the whole article?:

a) to describe b) to inform c) to shock d) to persuade

2/ Who is the article aimed at?:

a) ocean experts b) school children c) Greenpeace supporters d) people who don't know much about oceans

3/ Find words that mean the following (one from each section):

a) parked (for a ship) b) illegally taking people to another country to do forced work c) looking for more oil reserves on land or sea d) agreement

We should all own the oceans, but we don't at the moment. We need to tell our leaders now that we need a strong Global Ocean Treaty in 2020. We need a strong organisation to protect the seas, life in the sea, and life on Earth.

David Attenborough said at the end of his TV Blue Planet 2 series: 'Never before have we had such awareness of what we are doing to the planet. Never before have we had such power to do something about it.'

What can we do?



Suggestions: (fill the gaps)

- a) Eat less fish, or no 1/..... Choose sustainable fish. Check there is no modern 2/..... in the products you buy. Eat less meat (a fifth of fish is given as food to industrial animals like pigs and 3/.....).
- b) Don't buy products wrapped in 4/..... where possible. Tell shops to sell products with no plastic. Tell 5/..... to make laws against plastic waste.
- c) Produce less CO₂, with low 6/..... transport, the type of food you eat and things you buy. Things we do personally are good, but this problem is so big, it needs action at national and 7/..... political level too.
- d) Join a group eg. Greenpeace / Friends of the Earth. These 8/..... can help you take it to another level.

Suggestions: (key)

- a) Eat less fish, or no fish. Choose sustainable fish. Check there is no modern slavery in the products you buy. Eat less meat (a fifth of fish is given as food to industrial animals like pigs and chickens).
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These traditional fishers from Madagascar have changed to fishing more sustainable fish.

In pairs, write an interview with them for a magazine about:

- their fishing in the past, now and in the future*
- why they have to change*



Homework:

Read the whole article and the original article too (by clicking the link at the bottom – you’ll be surprised how easy it is to read the original after reading the ‘Easier English’ version:

[https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Who owns the sea%3F](https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Who_owns_the_sea%3F)

Read more articles about the oceans and seas:

[https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Issue 521](https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Issue_521)