Brief for Governments

Meeting at Part II of the 28th Session of the
International Seabed Authority

Council (July 10-21, 2023)
Assembly (July 24-28, 2023)

WWF policy asks at the July 2023 ISA Council

1. Ensure no licence / plan of work to mine is being approved
   No licence/plan of work should be approved, given the lack of scientific knowledge and projected serious impacts upon the ocean. Governments must ensure that their decision-making processes and voting structures at the Council are not biased in favour of granting mining contracts.

   Furthermore, Council should ensure that a directive to the Legal and Technical Committee (LTC) is given to ensure that no mining is allowed to proceed until the environmental, social and economic risks are understood, all alternatives to deep-sea minerals have been explored and it is proven that deep-sea mining can be managed in a way that protects the marine environment and prevents biodiversity loss, habitat degradation and species extinction.

2. Ensure that the mining regulations are not adopted
   As you cannot manage what you cannot measure, adoption of any regulations for deep seabed mining would be premature before the massive gaps in scientific knowledge have been closed. Hence, WWF urges governments not to finalise or adopt the regulatory framework until such time.

WWF policy ask at the 28th ISA Assembly

1. Call for a global moratorium
   Due to the lack of scientific certainty and the high risk to the ocean environment from deep seabed mining, WWF urges countries to join the growing call for a global moratorium on deep seabed mining, and to express this request in the formal ISA meetings of both the Council and the Assembly.
Introduction

Need to apply the precautionary approach
Deep seabed mining would pose manifold significant risks to the ocean, including through causing irreversible harm to the marine environments and its ecosystem services or the extinction of entire species. The scientific gaps related to the deep sea, including its ecosystems and species, are large and will take many years, if not decades, to fill. Without such knowledge, impacts of deep seabed mining cannot be fully understood.

This lack of scientific knowledge calls for a precautionary approach. Extraction must not go ahead until the environmental, social and economic risks are understood, all alternatives to deep-sea minerals have been explored and it is proven that deep-sea mining can be managed in a way that protects the marine environment and prevents biodiversity loss, habitat degradation and species extinction.

Need for consistency with relevant international policies and commitments
In light of the current status of scientific knowledge, the need to preserve biodiversity and to ensure the ocean’s resilience to the impacts of climate change, and to ensure consistency with international commitments made in numerous global and regional fora, there is a need to halt deep seabed mining now.

Deep seabed mining would go against many of the commitments governments have made to each other, e.g., in the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG14 on Oceans and SDG12 on Responsible Production and Consumption, as well as the newly adopted Global Biodiversity Framework and commitments to protect species under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS).

Need for more knowledge to make science-based decisions
Today, scientists estimate that we have as little as 1.1 per cent of the knowledge required to make science-based decisions around whether deep seabed mining can go ahead.

Knowledge of the nodules themselves is only just beginning to emerge – only in April 2023, scientists raised the alarm that nodules collected from the CCZ contain harmful levels of radioactive substances. As knowledge such as this emerges, it becomes even clearer that deep seabed mining would be complicated and involve significant known and unknown risks, both for the marine environment and for the people who would be working with the minerals mined from the deep ocean.

2023 a pivotal year
The year 2023 is a pivotal year for the deep sea and for the ISA. WWF therefore urges all governments to attend the ISA meetings during 2023 (and 2024), and to raise their voices to defend the ocean and its biodiversity and uphold commitments made towards sustainable development. In addition, we urge developed countries to consider providing financial support, as appropriate, to ensure that all states are able to participate in the important decisions pertaining to the Area, designated under UNCLOS as the common heritage of humankind.

Deep seabed mining in the global context

The value of a healthy ocean
A healthy ocean, where human activities are managed sustainably, is conservatively estimated to be worth USD24 trillion as an asset. The sustainable ocean economy, which excludes deep seabed
mining and other extractive industries, yields USD2.5 billion annually in goods and services to humanity. Today, this enormous value is at risk due to years of mismanagement, overexploitation and ocean health decline.

Instead of adding additional stressors further impacting upon ocean health, it is imperative that we work toward ocean protection and restoration, to ensure a healthy ocean that can provide social, economic and cultural benefits for humanity into the future.

Growing concern across the world
Across the world, calls for a moratorium, a precautionary pause, or an outright ban, are increasing. In 2021, the IUCN Conservation Congress passed a resolution calling for a global moratorium, and since then a number of countries have expressed concerns and joined the call, as have community groups, indigenous leaders, human rights advocates, scientists, NGOs, and fishers, as well as businesses - many of whom are would-be customers of these minerals.

Across the Pacific, but also in other parts of the world, Indigenous Peoples are raising their concern. At the March 2023 Council meeting, delegates heard from Indigenous leaders in the Pacific that their very genealogy is tightly tied to the deep ocean.

It is crucial that Indigenous Peoples as well as local communities who depend upon the ocean for their livelihoods, cultures and food security are involved in decisions that impact upon the fundament of their lives. This is also stipulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted and endorsed by the majority of ISA Member States.

Many more countries have raised their concern about the unnecessary haste in which the International Seabed Authority is progressing the regulatory framework on deep seabed mining, and this growing chorus of government voices in the March Council meeting called for a slowing down and a focus on ensuring the science gets done before any regulations can be finalised.

Investors shun deep seabed mining
Discussions with investors reveal that the risks around deep seabed mining are considered by many to be too large to be a credible investment option. Recently, several globally significant companies have divested from ventures planning to mine the deep sea.

The European Investment Bank has excluded deep seabed mining in its policies, and the most recent UNEP Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Initiative guidance states that deep seabed mining is not part of the sustainable blue economy and should be avoided. Banks and fund managers are also increasingly seeing the risks of investing in this destructive industry.

The Circular Economy
Instead of opening up a new frontier for linear extraction, WWF urges governments to invest in a fully circular economy.

The necessary transition to a fossil free economy, the ‘Green Transition’, does not need minerals from the deep sea. A 2022 report, The Future is Circular, commissioned by WWF, sets out pathways for how the switch to a fossil free economy can be done with less material footprint, avoiding opening up the deep sea to mining.

The report shows that demand for the studied seven critical minerals can be reduced by 58 per cent by: technological choices, recycling and circular economy measures. Through product-life extension
and materials recovery among others, governments can lead the way towards a “closed-loop” economy that works with nature, not against it.

The circular economy is not a distant vision. It is a US$4.5 trillion opportunity that is spurring more and more companies across industries to adopt circular principles to reduce costs, increase revenues, and manage risks. It is also increasingly being adopted in national economic plans.

Residual demand can be covered by responsible mining on land following the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA) principles, including the mining of existing mining waste.

We expect to see increasing commitments by companies and governments to switch to a circular mineral economy.

Get in touch!
WWF representatives attending the ISA meeting would welcome meeting with your delegation to discuss further. Please contact us to set up a meeting (see box for detail).

About WWF
WWF’s mission is to stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world’s biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

WWF’s vision is a Sustainable Blue Economy, that:
- provides social and economic benefits for current and future generations;
- restores, protects and maintains the diversity, productivity and resilience of marine ecosystems, and;
- is based on clean technologies, renewable energy, and circular material flows.

Our commitment
WWF will work with partners across government, industry, and civil society including indigenous people, coastal communities, women and youth to implement this vision into practice.

WWF is a member of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC).

For more information:
Kaja Lonne Fjaertoft, Policy Lead, WWF No Deep Seabed Mining Initiative, kjaertoft@wwf.no
Jessica Battle, Global Lead, WWF No Deep Seabed Mining Initiative, jessica.battle@wwf.se

More reports and material:
In too deep – what we know, and don’t know about deep seabed mining
Deep Seabed Mining and the Circular Economy
WWF’s Summary and Recommendations for Policy Makers based upon The Future is Circular report
WWF Deep Seabed Mining factsheet
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