

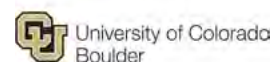
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# CATALYZING THE CREATION OF THE WORLD'S FIRST MARINE PROTECTED AREAS OF CORAL REEFS ON THE HIGH SEAS

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Annual Report – May 2020

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**In May 2019, we launched the Coral Reefs of the High Seas Coalition, a global alliance of partners that aims to support the establishment of the first marine protected areas to protect coral reefs in areas beyond national jurisdiction, commonly known as the high seas.**

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**Our approach brings together science, strategic communications, and policy to inspire international awareness and action:**

1. Convene and coordinate a coalition of policy advocates, organizations, and scientists focused on this issue, but that have previously worked in isolation.
2. Organize expeditions, beginning with the Salas y Gómez and Nazca Ridges, to gather essential new science and knowledge of this understudied ecosystem.
3. Leverage the science gathered from the expeditions to influence policymakers and inspire the United Nations to pass a treaty that creates a mechanism for establishing high seas marine protected areas; and
4. Ultimately, with this pathway in place, support the creation of the world's first marine protected area to protect coral reefs on the high seas.

**This report summarizes accomplishments in the first year of the coalition and provides a preview of activities planned for this year.**

## SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND EXPEDITIONS

Coral reefs are widely regarded as one of the top conservation priorities, as previous research has demonstrated that these ecosystems harbor an extraordinary biodiversity as well as a myriad of ecosystem service and human benefits. However, most of this knowledge is derived from studies on nearshore and shallow-water reefs, with coral reefs on the high seas remaining largely unstudied. Science is fundamental to our conservation efforts, and we are working to use the best-available science to provide the foundation for protecting these remarkable ecosystems. Specifically, we are in the process of synthesizing all previous science of high seas coral reefs, as well as conducting new expeditions using state-of-the art technologies to gain new understanding of these pivotal ecosystems.

### Publications

- Coalition partners recently published a [peer-reviewed scientific article](#) and [report](#) identifying priority areas on the high seas for protection. These reports were based on the best available science and identified the Salas y Gomez and Nazca Ridges as one of the most important areas to protect on the high seas.
- The coalition received an invitation to contribute an article to a special issue on deep-sea corals of the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Frontiers of Marine Science*. We are currently working on a manuscript that will synthesize all available scientific information on coral reefs on the high seas, as well discuss the political challenges and opportunities for protecting these important ecosystems. The article will be submitted to the journal by May 31, 2020.

### Expeditions

- In December 2019, we conducted a reconnaissance expedition that explored mesophotic coral reefs offshore Easter Island in collaboration with Oceana-Chile. While bad weather hampered operations, the expedition had several successful remotely operated vehicle dives, as well as a few dives using mixed-gas technical SCUBA. [A highlight video from the expedition is here](#). We are planning a follow-up expedition to explore mesophotic coral reefs in this region more comprehensively this year in November-December.



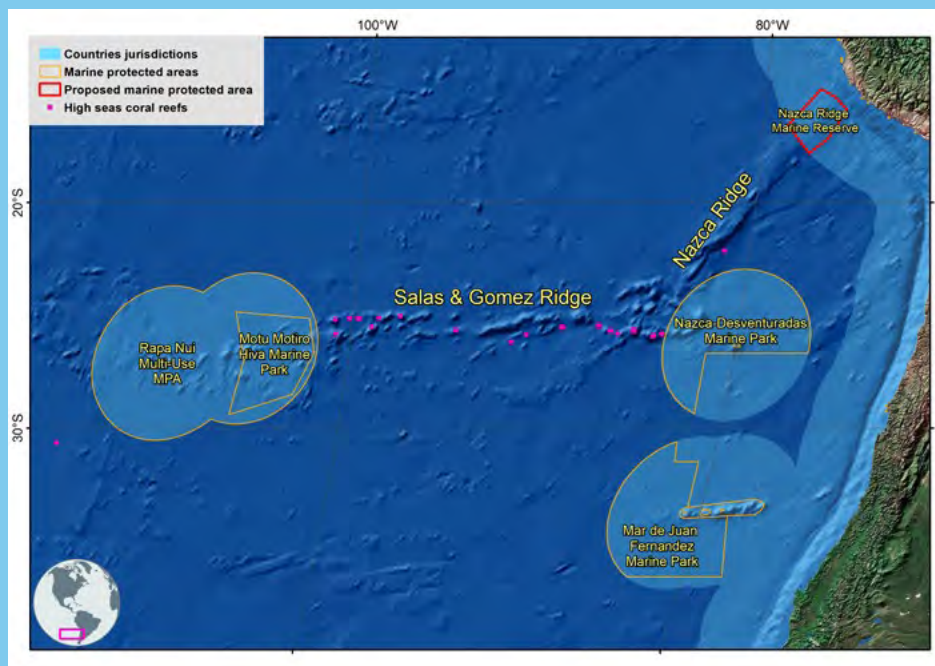
## OUR GEOGRAPHIC PRIORITY AREA: SALAS Y GÓMEZ AND NAZCA RIDGES

The Salas y Gómez and Nazca Ridges are located in the Southeastern Pacific Ocean. Collectively they stretch across over 1,800 miles of seafloor. These ridges are isolated from the South American continent by the Atacama Trench and the Humboldt Current System. This isolation has produced a unique biodiversity that is marked by one of the highest levels of marine endemism (unique species) known on Earth. Over 41% of the identified species in this region are found nowhere else. These areas provide important habitat for blue whales, leatherback turtles, swordfish, deep-water sharks, Chilean Jack Mackerel, coral reefs, and myriad other ecologically important species.

This region is also near the center of the South Pacific Gyre, a region that contains some of the clearest waters of our oceans. As a result, light-dependent ecosystems like coral reefs are found in deeper waters here, with early explorations documenting the deepest photosynthetic reefs found on Earth (985 feet), as well numerous species that are new to science.

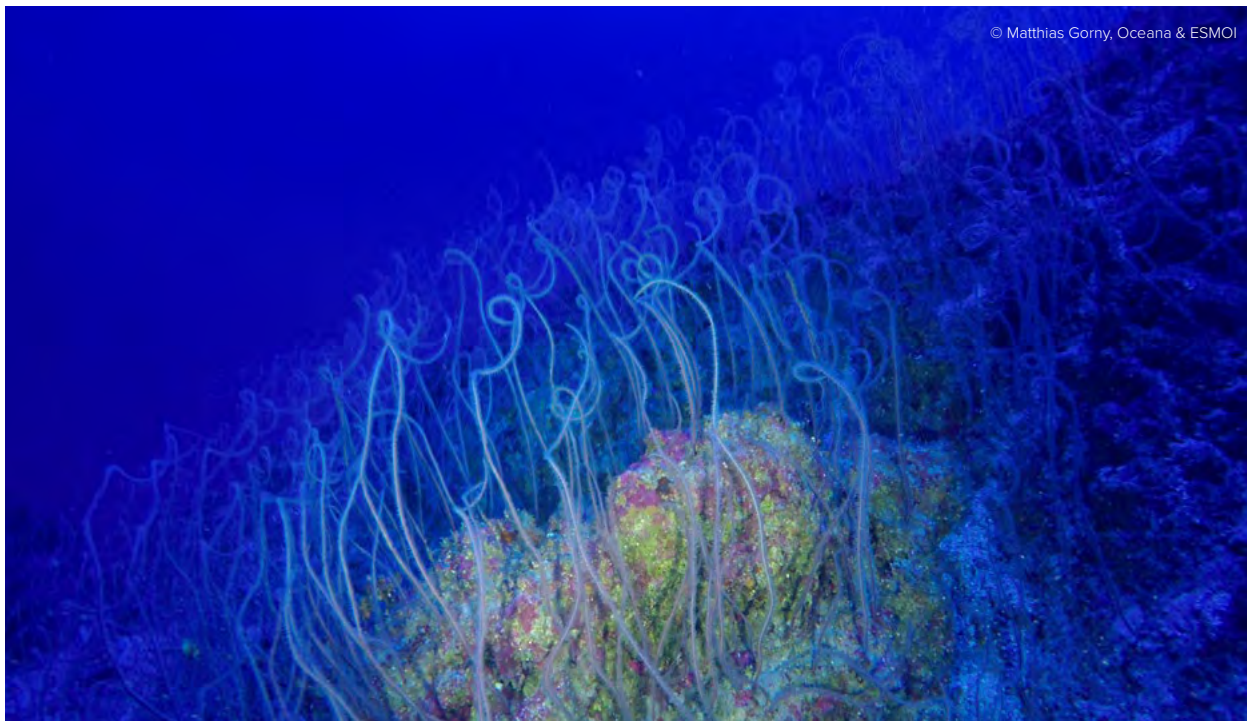
This high rate of new discoveries indicates that this region represents an enormous opportunity for future science and conservation efforts. In addition to its natural significance, this region also represents the easternmost extent of the Polynesian Triangle, a region with extremely rich cultures that have a long history of sustainably managing their ocean resources.

The ridges in this area border the national waters of Chile and Peru. The portion of Chile's national waters bordering this area is already protected, and Peru is considering protections for the portion of its national waters adjacent to this high sea area. Establishing a high seas MPA across the Salas y Gómez and Nazca Ridges would not only connect unique habitats and increase resilience, but also showcase a model for the establishment of a high seas MPA by neighboring countries that share an ecosystem.



## Expedition Planning

- We contributed to a proposal to the Schmidt Ocean Institute to bring the oceanographic research vessel *Falkor* to explore high seas ecosystems on the Salas y Gomez and Nazca Ridges. The proposal was funded, which will bring the vessel to the region in late 2021-early 2022. We are closely working with the chief scientist of the mission, Dr. Tina Molodtsova, in planning the expedition to ensure that it will collect data to support our high seas conservation efforts.
- In collaboration with several scientists and institutions, we submitted [a proposal to RevOcean](#) in hopes of bringing their newly-built research vessel and deep-water submersibles to explore seamounts on the Nazca Ridge. If selected, this will provide us with another 30-days of dedicated ship time to explore high seas coral reefs in our priority region in early 2022.
- We submitted [a proposal for exploration of high seas coral reefs in the Central Pacific](#) to the Consortium of Ocean Leadership and NOAA, who will hold a workshop this year to determine U.S. ocean exploration priorities in the Central Pacific. This workshop will be held on September 16-17 in Washington, DC. We will actively participate in the workshop, and thereby have the ability to inform exploration priorities in the U.S. Pacific and adjacent international waters for the next several years.
- We submitted [proposals for exploration of high seas seamounts in the North Atlantic](#) to NOAA, who was planning two ROV expeditions on NOAA Ship *Okeanos Explorer* this summer. There is still uncertainty about when these expeditions will take place as a result of the COVID.



## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

While our work is deeply rooted in the best-available science, we realize that this information needs to be strategically communicated to decision-makers in order to catalyze international awareness and action. We are therefore working to produce a series of communication products that not only raise awareness about the importance of high seas coral reefs, but also inspire decision-makers to protect these pivotal ecosystems.

- Emmy-award winning videographer Art Howard is producing a short film for the coalition aimed at inspiring a more conservation-centered mindset during the High Seas Treaty negotiations. The film will be shown to delegates that will participate in the High Seas Treaty negotiations, as well as via social media prior to the conference (date TBD).
- We are also securing high-resolution footage on impacts of high seas fisheries and mining, so that we can produce short videos to support proposals on increased high seas protections to the South Pacific Regional Fishery Management Organization (SPRFMO) and the International Seabed Authority (see above).
- We have joined the [OneOcean](#), an initiative with over 70 member institutions working collaboratively to achieve maximum impact for ocean conservation, such as a robust High Seas Treaty and making advances towards protecting 30% of our ocean by 2030. As a member of the One Ocean initiative, we have access to a wide range of unbranded communication materials, including [infographics](#), [social media toolkits](#), and more, which we will deploy at relevant upcoming policy forums (see above) to advance our high seas protection goal.
- In August 2019, we published an [article](#) on the launch of the Coral Reefs on the High Seas Coalition in the High Seas Alliance newsletter. The High Seas Alliance is a partnership between over 40 non-governmental organizations and groups aimed at building a strong common voice and constituency for the conservation of the high seas. Given our common goals, we are working very closely with the High Seas Alliance and coordinating our activities strategically.
- In August 2019, we contributed a highlight [video](#) with footage taken during previous high seas explorations to an exhibit that was featured at the Third Session of the Intergovernmental Conference in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (IGC 3). The purpose of the exhibit was to raise awareness about the unique and diverse ecosystems that exist within marine areas beyond national jurisdiction, and specifically targeted people that are involved in the United Nations High Seas Treaty negotiations.
- In January 2020, we published [a short article on our coalition](#) in *Deep-Sea Life*, an informal publication with wide readership (over 2,000 per issue) targeted to deep-sea managers, scientists, and other professionals.



## POLICY ENGAGEMENTS

Several pivotal events for high seas conservation were originally scheduled to occur in 2020, including the possible finalization of a United Nations agreement that would provide a legally-binding framework to create marine protected areas on the high seas, as well as the possible release of International Seabed Authority regulations that would enable the exploitation of deep-sea minerals on the high seas. While there is uncertainty of when these events will occur as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the coalition is focusing its efforts on producing products to release at these (and other relevant policy forums) in order to advance high seas conservation.

### Influencing the United Nations High Seas Treaty Negotiations

- In collaboration with the High Seas Alliance, we have submitted a series of edits to the draft text of the High Seas Treaty negotiations in hopes of positioning high seas ecosystems for better protection. Additionally, we will co-sponsor a reception for delegates that will participate in the treaty negotiations in New York (date TBD), during which we will distribute materials aimed at inspiring a more conservation-centered mindset during the negotiations.

### Influencing the International Seabed Authority Regulations on Deep-Sea Mining

- We are working with several organizations of our coalition on a strategy to engage with the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and its member states that will include increasing protections of high seas coral reefs. Earlier this year, we released a [statement calling for a moratorium on deep-sea mining](#). We are also preparing to attend the next ISA general meeting in July 2020, during which draft regulations on deep-sea mining will be discussed. While there is uncertainty about whether this ISA meeting will be held under COVID-19 travel restrictions, we will prepare to engage with ISA in reviewing draft mining regulations in order to better position high seas coral reefs for increased protections.

## Influencing the South Pacific Regional Fishery Management Organization

- We are working with Oceana and Global Fishing Watch to develop a proposal to the South Pacific Regional Fishery Management Organization (SPRFMO) to increase fishing protections of high seas seamounts of the Salas y Gomez and Nazca Ridges. The proposal will consist of (1) [background information on the importance of this region](#), (2) historic fishing data in this region (currently being compiled by Global Fishing Watch), and (3) [maps of proposed locations for increased protection](#). The proposal will be submitted to SPRFMO by September 2020, so that it can be presented at their next scientific committee meeting on October 3-8, 2020 (COVID-19 permitting).

## AND FINALLY, COALITION BUILDING AND COORDINATION

Our coalition currently includes a wide range of partners with expertise on ocean science, policy, law and communications including Conservation International, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Aspen High Seas Initiative, Oceana, the Bishop Museum, University of Hawai'i, Mission Blue, University of Colorado at Boulder, Global Oceans, National Geographic Pristine Seas, Association for Marine Exploration, Deep Ocean Stewardship Initiative, Universidad Católica del Norte, Big Ocean, and One Ocean. Representatives meet regularly and have formed working groups that coordinate on each of the focal areas of policy, science, and strategic communications, coordinated by Conservation International.

- On May 15-17, 2019, we convened a group of experts in ocean science, policy, law, and communications in Denver, Colorado to formally launch the Coral Reefs on the High Seas Coalition. By reviewing approaches that have been successful in establishing many marine protected areas within national jurisdictions, meeting discussions focused on how the coalition could best support the establishment of high seas MPAs by generating the scientific evidence base and developing the strategic communications that are necessary to advance international action. Furthermore, meeting discussions developed the framework for a two-year work plan of activities to advance coral reef conservation on the high seas, as well as how to best collaborate across the initiative.
- We have continued building out our [internal website](#) with materials that aim to facilitate collaborations between our coalition members, including detailed notes of all team meetings, maps, an extensive bibliography of references, highlight photos and videos, a calendar of relevant events and activities, and contact information. So far, the website is only available internally, however, the long-term vision of the website is to expand it to be a publicly available repository of information that promotes high seas conservation.
- We have developed a [logo](#) and updated [factsheet](#) in order to facilitate communications with potential partners. In addition to the new partnership with One Ocean (see above), we are also in the process of starting a new partnership with the [Deep Ocean Stewardship Initiative's working group on the UN BBNJ process](#) in order to have additional avenues to influence the IGC4 negotiations.



## **NEXT STEPS**

As a result of the COVID crisis there is still a lot of uncertainty about the timing of several conferences and events, particularly those that were originally scheduled prior to this summer. Nevertheless, the coalition is planning expeditions, developing proposals and targeting communication materials to inspire increased protections of the high seas, with an initial focus on the Salas y Gomez and Nazca Ridges.

**To find out how you can help support our work of catalyzing action to protect the largest portion of our ocean - the high seas - contact: [dwagner@conservation.org](mailto:dwagner@conservation.org)**

