

# CORAL REEFS ON THE HIGH SEAS

Supporting the Establishment of the First Large-scale Marine Conservation Areas to Protect Coral Reefs on the High Seas



## THE PROBLEM:

The ocean produces half the oxygen we breathe, absorbs a quarter of the carbon dioxide we emit, and provides the main source of protein for over 3 billion people. Until recently people believed that we could not seriously damage the ocean, but we now know this is not true. Threats to the global ocean increase as fishing vessels decimate once productive fisheries, plastic pollution collects in massive garbage patches, and a changing climate alters the chemical composition of the ocean, killing our reefs and affecting the myriad of species that call it home. As shallow and nearshore waters become increasingly exploited, people are going farther and deeper in search of more catch, more minerals, and more resources to exploit.

Science tells us that for people and our planet to have a fighting chance against climate change and other human impacts, we need to effectively protect at least 30% of our ocean. Today, less than 8% is protected. With over 60% of the world's ocean lying in areas beyond national jurisdictions, commonly known as the high seas, it is critical that we increase our science and management efforts, change global policy, and add protection to this critical ocean realm, which represents the largest and most threatened part of our ocean.

## THE SOLUTION:

### Science + Policy + Strategic Communications – A Coalition Approach

Using approaches that have been successful in establishing many large-scale marine protected areas (MPAs) within countries jurisdictions, we are building the scientific rationale, strategic communications and political support to support the designation of the first large-scale marine conservation areas that would protect coral reefs on the high seas. Coral

reef ecosystems have a long history of protection within many states due to their numerous ecosystem services and well documented benefits to humans. By focusing on these key ecosystems, we believe that we have the best chance to support conservation efforts on the high seas. While the terms “coral reef” and “high seas” are rarely combined in the same sentence, coral reefs can occur in remote and deeper waters outside the jurisdiction of coastal states. In fact, coral reefs have been documented in many remote locations on the high seas at depths exceeding 2,000 meters. Due to their remoteness, high seas coral reefs are some of the most under surveyed of all ocean ecosystems, and because they are not protected by the laws of any country, they are among the most vulnerable and potentially overexploited reefs on Earth.

Early research indicates that high seas coral reefs provide critical habitat for a high diversity of species, provide resilience to climate change, and represent important refuges for many species that are being impacted in nearshore locations, including many fishery species. As such, high seas coral reefs have been identified as one of the top research and conservation priorities in marine areas beyond national jurisdiction. Using the best-available science and various global databases, we have identified potential high seas coral reef areas in each major ocean basin, with Pacific areas likely holding the most promise for protection and scientific exploration. These high seas areas occur near large-scale MPAs that have been established by heads of state that understand the critical need for a sustainably managed and well protected ocean. By proving the ecological connectivity between these high seas areas and already protected waters, we are building the scientific rationale for the first large-scale marine conservation areas that would protect coral reefs in marine areas beyond national jurisdictions.

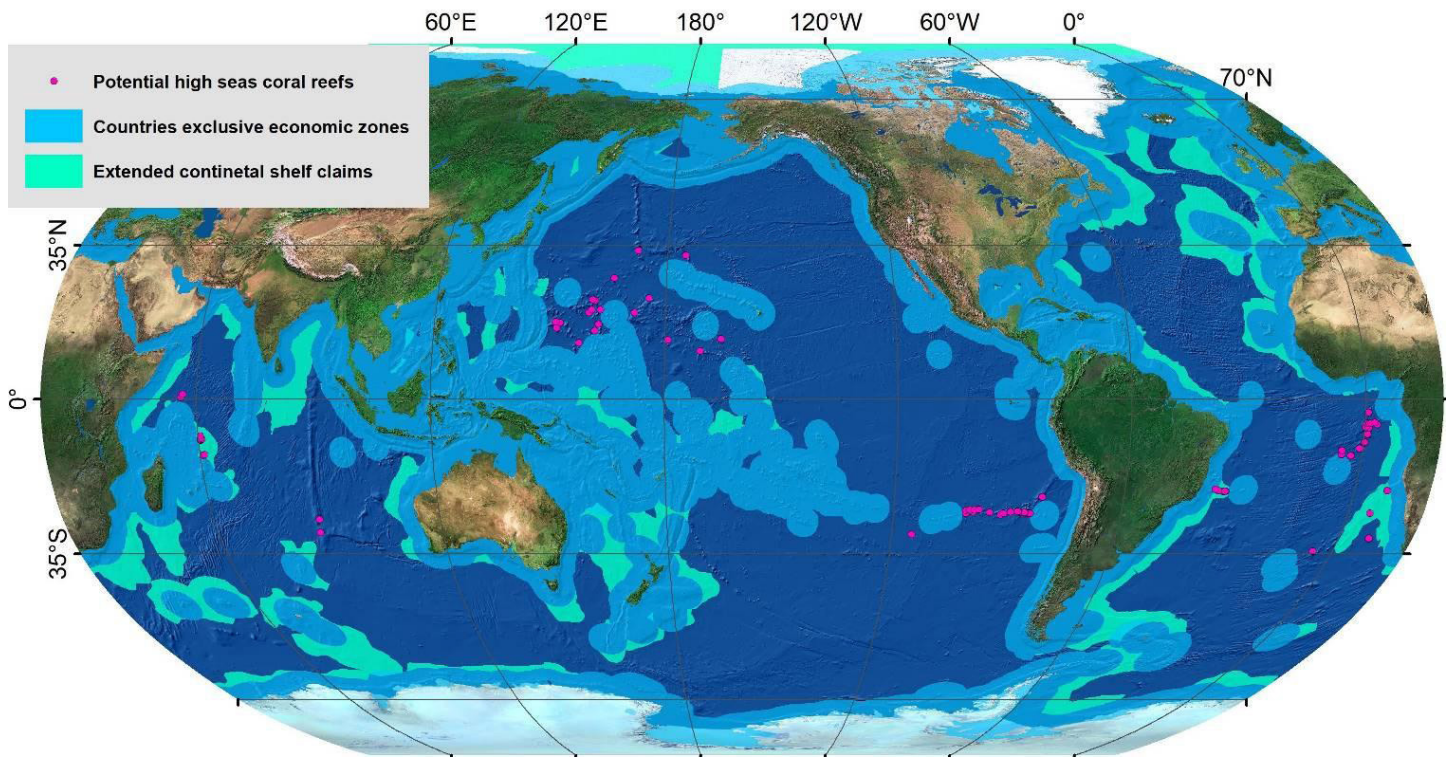


Figure 1 - Potential high seas coral reefs areas based on data from the Global Seamounts Database.

## PROGRESS TO DATE

We are building a small, focused global coalition of partners to conduct targeted, cutting-edge exploration, link research results to protected area design, raise public and political support, and advance international policy. In May, 2019, we convened a group of experts in ocean science, policy, law and communications to develop the framework for this coalition and generate strategy to support the establishment of the first large-scale protected area for coral reefs on the high seas. Coalition science and exploration are being led by the Bishop Museum and the University of Hawaii, whereas Conservation International and Oceana are undertaking policy efforts with support from numerous other partners. Ongoing discussions are being held with many other potential partners with high seas expertise to determine how to best collaborate across the initiative.

## IMPACT

By working closely with countries and coalition partners, we are generating the scientific evidence base, international partnerships, and strategic communications necessary to designate the first large-scale high seas protected area outside the CCAMLR and OSPAR conventions. We aim for our work to be completed prior to the concluding negotiations on the United Nations' Agreement on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ). Understanding and protecting high seas coral reefs may be one of the most effective things we can do to secure ocean resilience and healthy fisheries for future generations. Protecting these remote ocean 'rainforests of the sea' will likely yield higher conservation, food security, and climate resilience value than most other high seas areas, and are therefore the most strategic habitats to concentrate our efforts.

## BUDGET

The initial shared fundraising goal is \$3 million over 3 years, across multiple coalition partner organizations.

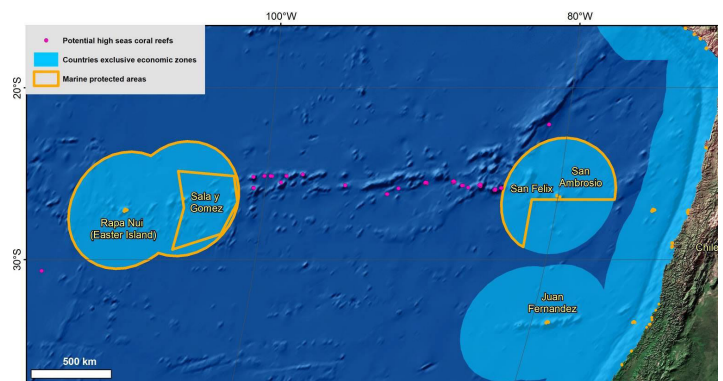


Figure 2 - Potential high seas coral reefs and established marine protected areas in the Southeastern Pacific.

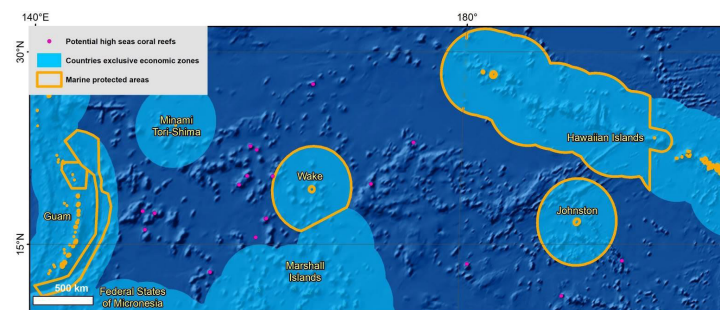


Figure 3 - Potential high seas coral reefs and established marine protected areas in the North-Central Pacific.

### For More Information Contact:

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