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MoP-13-INFO-14

Progress towards effective protection of Seamounts

The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition

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Abstract	
<p>SIOFA has taken a number of decisions over the last year to protect vulnerable features from the impact of bottom contact fishing, but is yet to fully implement the UNGA Resolutions to “protect vulnerable marine ecosystems, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold water corals, from destructive fishing practices” (UNGA A/RES 61/105, 64/72, 66/68, 70/75) and “eliminating destructive fishing practices” (UNGA A/RES 79/145). DSCC draws the attention of the SIOFA MoP to recent international resolutions which reinforce existing global commitments and international expectations for the protection of seamount ecosystems, mesopelagic ecosystem integrity and biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. DSCC also notes the entry into force of the BBNJ Agreement on 17 January 2026, which reflects the commitment of States to act, individually and collectively, as “stewards of the ocean in areas beyond national jurisdiction”. This paper urges the MoP to (1) implement UNGA resolutions to ensure the protection of vulnerable ecosystems, including seamounts, through precautionary spatial closures, given their importance for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem integrity in the Indian Ocean; (2) urgently phase out bottom trawling activity on known (or likely to occur) seamounts and other VMEs, given the unacceptable environmental risk to marine biodiversity, and consistent with IUCN and CMS COP15 resolutions; (3) establish a working group to consider mechanisms necessary to align with future BBNJ needs; and (4) urgently progress work to incorporate climate change impact into species and ecosystems assessments, given that climate change is likely to exacerbate other human impacts.</p>	

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² Documents available only to members invited to closed sessions.

Progress towards effective protection of Seamounts

Introduction

DSCC draws the attention of the SIOFA MoP to recent resolutions and decisions adopted by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) COP 15 (March 2026) and International Union for Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress (IUCN WCC) 8th World Conservation Congress (October 2025). Both resolutions reinforce global commitments and international expectations in calling for prioritisation of the protection of seamount ecosystems from destructive fishing practices in areas beyond national jurisdiction. They coincide with the entry into force of the BBNJ Agreement on 17 January 2026, which reflects the commitment of States to act, individually and collectively, as *“stewards of the ocean in areas beyond national jurisdiction”*.

In addition, DSCC notes the forthcoming UNGA Bottom Fishing review (and preceding multi-stakeholder workshop) which will discuss the implementation of previous UNGA resolutions on sustainable fisheries, addressing the impacts of bottom fishing on VMEs and the long-term sustainability of deep-sea fish stocks. The recent decisions by IUCN members (8th WCC) and Parties to the CMS (COP15) demonstrate a strengthening commitment to the protection of seamounts and other VMEs from destructive fishing practices alongside an overwhelming global view that bottom trawling on VMEs is incompatible with modern ocean governance. These commitments will feed into the United National 2026 Bottom Fisheries Review, affirming the importance and urgency of implementation of more than a generation of UNGA resolutions calling for the protection of VMEs, including their associated and dependent species, from destructive fishing practices.

Context

Seamounts and similar features are biodiversity hotspots in the open ocean, providing vital habitat, spawning and foraging grounds, and migratory pathways for a vast array of species including turtles, whales and sharks. They are fundamental lifelines in the ocean, interrupting global ocean currents, pushing nutrients from deep in the sea to the ocean’s surface, fueling food webs and playing a key role in ocean mixing and carbon cycling. Despite their immense value, seamounts and the life they support, face the catastrophic threat of destructive, indiscriminate fishing practices, including deep-sea bottom trawling.

The Third World Ocean Assessment (released on 8 June 2026) identifies bottom trawling as “the most significant human activity on continental margins and in canyons” and warned that “Seamounts and pinnacles (sect. 4, chap. 5 (I)) are submerged mountains that support distinctive deep-sea biodiversity, including corals, sponges and economically valuable fish species. Deep-sea fisheries are increasingly exploiting these ecosystems, resulting in habitat degradation.” (p 15) The UN warns that the practice leads to the permanent “unsealed disappearance” of the natural seafloor, a finding that builds upon the Second World Ocean Assessment, which named bottom trawling the “greatest current threat to seamount ecosystems.”

Since 2004, UNGA resolutions, notably resolution 61/105 in 2006, have mandated global action to protect VMEs from destructive fishing. The landmark 61/105 resolution called on States to “take action immediately...and consistent with the precautionary approach and ecosystem approaches, to sustainably manage fish stocks and protect VMEs including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold-water corals, from destructive fishing practices.” Since then, the UNGA has been monitoring

State and RFMO progress, with the next review in 2026, including a two-day multi-stakeholder workshop at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 13 to 14 July 2026. Workshop participants will include States, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), RFMOs and other fisheries bodies, and other relevant specialized agencies, funds and programmes, intergovernmental bodies and non-governmental organizations.

The recently released Report of the Secretary General on actions taken in response to relevant UNGA resolutions 64/72, 66/68 and 77/118 (A/81/150) notes in paragraph 39. that “ deep sea fisheries, particularly bottom trawl fisheries, are often characterized by high levels of bycatch and broad ecosystems impacts”, and in para. 43, that “ ... continued bottom trawling has been shown to threaten the viability of areas that could serve as natural climate refugia for VMEs, further undermining their resilience”.

The protection of seamounts and other VMEs from the destructive impact of bottom trawling is robustly supported by existing arrangements. An agreed transition away from such fishing gear would directly operationalise a generation of under-implemented UNGA resolutions.

Recent international resolutions and decisions relevant to SIOFA

Over the past year the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) COP 15 (March 2026) and International Union for Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress (IUCN) World Conservation Congress (October 2025) have adopted resolutions for the protection of seamount ecosystems, mesopelagic ecosystem integrity, and biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The BBNJ Agreement entered into force on 17 January 2026, providing tools to reinforce global commitments to conserve marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Further details and relevance to SIOFA are set out below:

Resolution	Key Language	Relevance to SIOFA
2026 CMS COP15 Resolution & Decision: Conserving Seamount Ecosystems	<i>15.AA (a) Parties prioritize the protection of seamount ecosystems from multiple threats, including but not limited to overfishing and destructive fishing practices that threaten their conservation and, as necessary, identify and implement appropriate area-based protection measures, including marine protected areas.</i>	Supports precautionary protection of seamount ecosystems for SIOFA species
2025 IUCN WCC Resolution 8.032: Protecting seamounts and vulnerable marine ecosystems from destructive practices	<i>2. a. fully implement UNGA resolutions (including 61/105 (2006), 64/72 (2009), 66/68 (2011), 71/123 (2016) and 77/118 (2022) that call for the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems, including seamounts, cold-water corals and hydrothermal vents.</i> <i>2. c. Support and activate a transition away from bottom trawling on seamounts at the UN General Assembly bottom fishing review at the end of 2026</i>	Reinforces that bottom trawling should not occur where seamounts or other vulnerable marine ecosystems may occur, and explicitly supports a transition away from bottom trawling on seamounts due to their extreme vulnerability.

**2025 IUCN WCC
Resolution 8.035:**
[Protection of
Mesopelagic
Ecosystem Integrity](#)

1. a. protect the integrity of the mesopelagic zone by applying the precautionary approach in the assessment and regulation of activities that may have an impact on the mesopelagic zone based on the best available science. iii. ocean industries including fishing, deep-sea mining and geoengineering demonstrate that adverse impacts to biodiversity or critical ecosystem or climate functions of this zone are prevented

Highly relevant to SIOFA where data paucity in many areas requires precaution before future fishing activity and stronger ecosystem-based scientific assessment.

**026 UNGA Resolution
Document A/80/L.65:**

Advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the obligations of States in respect of climate change

2. Calls upon all States to comply with their respective obligations under international law to ensure the protection of the climate system and other parts of the environment from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, as identified by the Court

ALL SIOFA States are obliged to ensure ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of the fishery resources in the Area (Article 2), the protection of biodiversity (Article 4f), minimisation of harmful impact on the marine environment (Article 4e), based on best available scientific evidence and precautionary approach.

BBNJ

Entry into force

17 January 2026

Article 68(1) "This Agreement shall enter into force 120 days after the date of deposit of the sixtieth instrument of ratification, approval, acceptance or accession."

The BBNJ Agreement's adoption of the precautionary principle or approach provides a legal basis to protect vulnerable seamounts by phasing out destructive bottom trawling. States Party to the BBNJ Agreement are mandated to promote BBNJ objectives within RFMOs and other relevant bodies to promote the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in ABNJ.

Another relevant measure is the CBD's Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). Seamounts represent an estimated 21% of the global ocean floor. Increased protection of VMEs would support progress towards the achievement of key GBF 30x30 Target 3, and in doing so, help build momentum under the now in force BBNJ Agreement to protect marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. A transition away from destructive fishing practices would also be in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal's timeline to sustainably manage and protect marine ecosystems (target 14.2).

DSCC Recommendations

Together, these resolutions reaffirm the need for prioritisation of the protection of vulnerable ecosystems before considering further fishing expansion. The uncertainties around the impact of climatic changes on species and ecosystems further reinforce the urgency of their implementation .

For further information the DSCC refers SIOFA Members to DSCC papers [MoP-12-INFO-02-DSCC-Implementing-Area-Protection.pdf](#), [MoP-12-INFO-03 DSCC Preparing for BBNJ Agreement](#), [MoP-12-INFO-04 DSCC Making Progress on VME and Seamount Protection](#), [SC-11-INFO-19 DSCC Progress towards effective protection of Seamounts..](#)

1: The DSCC urges **the MoP to prioritise the protection of seamounts**, through precautionary spatial closures, given their importance for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem integrity in the Indian Ocean, and encourages:

- Recognition of seamounts and similar features as VMEs, consistent with UNGA resolutions and in accordance with FAO Deep-Sea Guidelines;
- Prioritisation of development of a comprehensive VME register (including seamounts and other features), given their particular importance, including to migratory species of the SIOFA region;
- Protection of seamounts under the Standard Protocol on benthic fisheries closure designation, starting with known (or likely to occur) seamounts given the unacceptable environmental risk of significant adverse impacts and the bycatch of associated and dependent species;
- Recognition that spatial closures will contribute to SIOFA's efforts to be 'BBNJ' ready; and
- Consideration of the role of spatial closures when developing response actions to multiple threats, including (in addition to destructive fishing practices), overfishing and climate change impacts.

The DSCC further urges the MoP to direct the Scientific Committee to include population of the Benthic Protected Area Protocol in its work plan, focusing initially on:

- A focused session to discuss techniques for improved mapping and recording of VMEs (SC-9, para 302), and include in that session a case-by-case assessment of seamounts as VMEs under existing protocols/criteria to better inform:
 - management of seamounts as VMEs, and
 - the submission of further closed areas under this criteria; and
- Provision of advice on a standardised review period and effective monitoring and management plans for designated spatial closures.

2: The DSCC notes the disturbing conclusion of the consultant's draft report on climate change impacts received by the SC, that the Indian Ocean is among the first ocean basins where compounding climate pressures will have detectable impacts on fish populations, while also being a highly under-studied ocean basin, and that many SIOFA species will struggle to cope with such conditions. **DSCC urges the MoP to:**

- Prioritise the testing of the proposed processes for assessing the vulnerability of SIOFA species and ecosystems to climate change impacts;

- Urgently task the SC with developing climate change indicators to be regularly reported and reviewed; and
- Routinely incorporate climate impact data into stock assessments and precautionary fisheries framework.

3: In preparation for the SIOFA operationalisation of the BBNJ Agreement, and noting the work undertaken by the Secretariat reported in MoP-13-15 the DSCC urges the MoP to:

- Establish a standing agenda item on BBNJ readiness and investigate the suggestions made by DSCC in [MoP-12-INFO-03 DSCC Preparing for BBNJ Agreement](#);
- Request that the Compliance Committee and Scientific Committee provide advice on the decisions necessary to ensure that these Committees are capable of providing relevant support to the MoP during consultations with the BBNJ COP; and
- Establish a working group to consider the issues raised in **MoP-13-15** and provide recommendations to the 2027 MoP on:
 - (i) Possible gaps or discrepancies impacting BBNJ COP engagement that the SIOFA MoP should address;
 - (ii) Procedures necessary to develop EIA and ABMT procedures in response to the BBNJ Agreement entry into force; and
 - (iii) Secretariat functions to execute cooperation, consultation and other functions under the BBNJ Agreement.