

Stepping up action



Climate action is urgently needed, with reports appearing regularly highlighting the current state of the planet and scientific understanding of what is to come. There are steps being made that should be celebrated, but more is needed.

Time is running out. This is the message that came through from the *Synthesis Report of the IPCC 6th Assessment Report*. Evoking messages such as “final warning”¹ and “humanity is on thin ice”² highlight the need for urgent action.

The World Meteorological Organization’s *State of the Global Climate 2022* report³, released April 2023, repeats the message that progress on climate action is not moving fast enough. The report tells of record ocean heat content, glacial melt and sea-level rise – changes that will persist even if emissions were immediately halted. The last 8 years (2015–2022) are the warmest on record, a concerning finding when the El Niño Southern Oscillation has been in the cool La Niña phase for the most recent 3 years. It is now routine to hear of extreme events occurring across the globe – for example, the current (at the time of writing) record temperatures and a severe heatwave in Asia with temperatures exceeding 40 °C in many locations.

The Paris Agreement (adopted in 2015) set the scene for coordinated international action, and the first global stocktake of progress towards it will conclude at the UN Climate Conference (COP28) later this year. The two-year process will assess where countries are now in terms of emissions reductions as well as identifying gaps, and ratcheting of ambition. But it is unlikely that the results have improved substantially since the *Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Synthesis Report*, published October 2022, which showed emissions were reducing but not sufficiently to stay under 1.5 °C of warming (ref. 4).

However, outside the climate negotiations sphere, there has been recent international



agreement to put environment protections in place. In December 2022, the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15) adopted the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, for which the headline message is the 30x30 commitment – to protect 30% of land and ocean by 2030. Biodiversity is in rapid decline. A report in 2022 found that there has been around 69% decline over the last 50 years (ref. 5). Protecting and maintaining ecosystems is essential to ensure that they continue to provide the many services that humanity rely on.

In a move that will help achieve the 30x30 ambition, the High Seas Treaty, under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, will provide stringent protection of areas of the ocean outside national borders – the high sea and the deep seafloor – as well as rules on resource use. Agreed in March 2023, the treaty includes the need for environmental impact assessments for exploitation of marine resources, including marine genetic resources, commercial activities and large projects (for example, geoengineering solutions).

The ocean has been under-regulated so far, with only 1% of international waters protected currently. Thirty-nine per cent of the ocean is within national boundaries, where varying levels of protections apply; however, overall,

it is estimated that around 8% of the ocean is protected, compared with around 17% of land.

There are criticisms of 30x30 and the High Seas Treaty, but to have achieved international agreement in the right direction for environmental protection should be applauded. Hopefully, these new agreements, and increased international cooperation, will be just the starting point. To ensure a healthy planet for all, these agreements including the Paris Agreement should be seen as something to overachieve on; getting them implemented ahead of schedule is a worthy ambition.

Published online: 9 May 2023

References

1. Harvey, F. Scientists deliver ‘final warning’ on climate crisis: act now or it’s too late. *The Guardian* <https://go.nature.com/3Hlnxaa> (20 March 2023).
2. Rice, D. & Pulver, D. V. ‘Humanity is on thin ice:’ major UN report says ‘urgent’ action is needed to combat climate change. *USA Today News* <https://go.nature.com/3HmEKQr> (20 March 2023).
3. *State of the Global Climate 2022* WMO-No. 1316 (World Meteorological Organization, 2023); <https://go.nature.com/427Rmmq>
4. UNFCC. Climate plans remain insufficient: more ambitious action needed now. <https://go.nature.com/3oHX3ZU> (26 October 2022).
5. *Living Planet Report 2022* (WWF, 2022); <https://go.nature.com/3NoCnAv>