
IFAW submission: priorities areas for the Third Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) is a non-governmental organisation in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 2002 and contributor to the Major Groups and Stakeholders of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). IFAW attended the Second Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). IFAW also regularly engages with a number of other United Nations Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) to further IFAW's mission, which is to rescue and protect animals around the world. These include the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS)

To achieve our mission, IFAW works to rescue individuals, safeguard populations, and preserve habitat. With projects in more than 40 countries, IFAW provides hands-on assistance to animals in need and advocates saving populations from cruelty and depletion. As part of this work IFAW has a marine conservation programme.

IFAW notes from the meeting summary of the 3 March meeting of the Bureau of Committee of Permanent Representatives that the Bureau agreed to recommend five general priority areas of the Third Session of UNEA (UNEA-3), deferring discussion on the sub-areas to a later date. One of those five areas was marine pollution. IFAW welcomes the inclusion of marine pollution within the priority areas. IFAW would like to submit specific comments regarding this item and the possibility of including a sub-area within this item on underwater noise pollution.

IFAW recommends the addition of human-made underwater noise pollution ("ocean noise") as a priority sub-area. This form of marine pollution has so far been overlooked in submissions made to date by Member States.

Ocean noise is often overlooked in discussions of pollution because, unlike other forms of pollution, it is an invisible threat. Yet many marine species, particularly marine mammals, rely on sound as their primary sense. They use sound to navigate, communicate, socialise and find mates, find prey and avoid predators. In short, they are reliant on sound to conduct activities necessary for their survival.

Human-made (anthropogenic) noise, from sources such as shipping, seismic testing used in oil and gas exploration, pile-driving and other offshore construction, and naval and commercial sonar, inhibits the ability of marine life to carry out activities necessary for their survival. It represents just as much of a threat as other more visible forms of pollution in the marine environment. However, unlike many of these other forms of pollution, noise pollution need not be persistent in the marine environment and can be removed immediately if concerted efforts are made to reduce noise at source.

Ocean noise pollution is increasingly being recognised as an emergent issue that requires action by international institutions to protect the marine environment. For example, at the recent CBD COP13, a further decision was passed on the subject (Dec XIII/10. Addressing impacts of marine debris and anthropogenic underwater noise on marine and coastal biodiversity, see: <https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-13/cop-13-dec-10-en.pdf>). The Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission has also made a series of recommendations on ocean noise, and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has introduced guidelines to address underwater noise pollution from shipping.

While there are already available solutions to address noise pollution, with some currently being used, additional and sustained international collaboration and partnerships are required to limit and reduce the acute and chronic impacts of noise pollution on marine life. It is for this reason that IFAW recommends the inclusion of ocean noise pollution as a priority sub-area under the marine pollution area proposed for the Third Session of UNEA.

Sustainable Development Goals require UN Member States to reverse the state of decline of our oceans. Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, includes a specific target (14.1) on marine pollution, calling on nations to prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds by 2025 (emphasis added). While IFAW welcomes the focus to date on plastic pollution in oceans, this is not the only form of pollution and we urge consideration of other forms, in particular noise pollution which has so far been overlooked.

Given the global scale and documented impacts of direct mortality and acoustic habitat loss on a wide range of marine species, including endangered and protected species, it is critical to incorporate addressing noise pollution into UNEA-3 and into the framework for delivery of the SDG14 targets.

Further information:

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