



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Committee Office, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

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From the Chair of the Committee

The Rt Hon Lord Benyon

Minister of State

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

16 November 2022

Dear Lord Benyon

International Protections for Marine Mammals

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is holding an inquiry into [Marine Mammals](#), which is examining the threats to marine mammal populations and what role the UK can play in protecting these creatures, both domestically and internationally. We received 20 pieces of [written evidence](#) and held an [oral evidence session](#) on Tuesday 11th October 2022. A Ministerial session is due to be held shortly, but in advance of this I am writing to set out some time-critical interim conclusions.

We have heard how marine mammals are key species in maintaining a healthy marine ecosystem, performing vital functions including the cycling of nutrients. They have also been referred to as '[sentinel species](#)', acting as an indicator of ocean health more broadly. However, the range of threats they face are [manifold](#), including chemical and noise pollution, interference from shipping vessels, climate change, entanglement in fishing gear and commercial factors such as hunting. This led to hundreds of marine mammal experts from more than 40 countries releasing a [statement](#) in 2020 about their 'grave concerns' related to the extinction risk to many species and populations, criticising the lack of political will to take action.

The 15th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15), due to be held in Montreal from 7th to 19th December 2022, provides a crucial opportunity to adopt an ambitious new framework to drive action on global biodiversity. This includes meeting the [30by30](#) target of protecting 30% of the world's oceans by 2030 – something Chris Butler Stroud, Chief Executive of Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), told us was "[a great aspiration](#)".

The UK Government's [25 Year Environment Plan](#) recognises these challenges. It commits to "reversing the loss of marine biodiversity and, where practicable, restoring it", while crucially acknowledging that the UK Government has a role in protecting and improving the environment both at home and abroad by showing "leadership" on marine health. We are pleased to see the UK



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championing ambitious ocean action within the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) via the [Global Ocean Alliance](#) (GOA), including 30by30. We were also pleased to hear in oral evidence from [Mark Simmonds OBE](#), Director of Science at Marine NGO OceanCare, that in his view the UK had shown “tremendous leadership” on international marine conventions. However, 30by30 is not yet agreed by all parties to the CBD, and as WDC told us in [written evidence](#): “With the UK leading on [30by30], it falls to the UK to help make it happen”. **We therefore call on the Government to do everything in its power to secure a global agreement on 30by30 as part of an ambitious Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework at CBD COP15.**

We further note the concern raised by witnesses to our inquiry regarding inadequate protections for marine mammals on the “high seas” – waters beyond international jurisdiction, covering around [61% of the ocean](#). We note that several rounds of talks have been held under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) aimed at devising a High Seas Treaty, via [the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction](#) (BBNJ); however, the most recent of these, held in August 2022, ended [without an agreement](#). We heard calls for the UK to champion another round of negotiations on the BBNJ, with [Greenpeace arguing](#) that unless an emergency session is convened it will be “challenging” to meet the 30by30 target. Both the 25 Year Environment Plan ([p120](#)) and the [GOA Initiative](#) set out clear commitments from the UK to play an active role in securing an agreement on BBNJ. Therefore, **we recommend that the Government formally calls for an emergency session of UNCLOS to continue working towards the agreement of a High Seas Treaty as soon as practicable.**

We would appreciate a response to this letter no later than 25 November 2022.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee