


# Governing the oceansThe tragedy of the high seas

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 [economist.com/leaders/2014/02/22/the-tragedy-of-the-high-seas](https://www.economist.com/leaders/2014/02/22/the-tragedy-of-the-high-seas)

New management is needed for the planet's most important common resource

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IN 1968 an American ecologist, Garrett Hardin, published an article entitled "The Tragedy of the Commons". He argued that when a resource is held jointly, it is in individuals' self-interest to deplete it, so people will tend to undermine their collective long-term interest by over-exploiting rather than protecting that asset. Such a tragedy is now unfolding, causing serious damage to a resource that covers almost half the surface of the Earth.

The high seas—the bit of the oceans that lies beyond coastal states' 200-mile exclusive economic zones—are a commons. Fishing there is open to all. Countries have declared minerals on the seabed "the common heritage of mankind". The high seas are of great economic importance to everyone—fish is a more important source of protein than beef—and getting more so. The number of patents using DNA from sea-creatures is rocketing, and one study suggests that marine life is a hundred times more likely to contain material useful for anti-cancer drugs than is terrestrial life.

Yet the state of the high seas is deteriorating (see [article](#)). Arctic ice now melts away in summer. Dead zones are spreading. Two-thirds of the fish stocks in the high seas are over-exploited, even more than in the parts of the oceans under national control. And strange things are happening at a microbiological level. The oceans produce half the planet's supply of oxygen, mostly thanks to chlorophyll in aquatic algae. Concentrations of that chlorophyll are falling. That does not mean life will suffocate. But it could further damage the climate, since less oxygen means more carbon dioxide.

For tragedies of the commons to be averted, rules and institutions are needed to balance the short-term interests of individuals against the long-term interests of all users. That is why the dysfunctional policies and institutions governing the high seas need radical reform.

## Net loss

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The first target should be fishing subsidies. Fishermen, who often occupy an important place in a country's self-image, have succeeded in persuading governments to spend other people's money subsidising an industry that loses billions and does huge environmental damage. Rich nations hand the people who are depleting the high seas \$35 billion a year in cheap fuel, insurance and so on. The sum is over a third of the value of the catch. That should stop.

Second, there should be a global register of fishing vessels. These have long been exempt from an international scheme that requires passenger and cargo ships to carry a unique ID number. Last December maritime nations lifted the exemption—a good first step. But it is still up to individual countries to require fishing boats flying their flag to sign up to the ID scheme. Governments should make it mandatory, creating a global record of vessels to help crack down on illegal high-seas fishing. Somalis are not the only pirates out there.

Third, there should be more marine reserves. An eighth of the Earth's land mass enjoys a measure of legal protection (such as national-park status). Less than 1% of the high seas does. Over the past few years countries have started to set up protected marine areas in their own economic zones. Bodies that regulate fishing in the high seas should copy the idea, giving some space for fish stocks and the environment to recover.