



**Seascope: the state of our oceans**

## First steps agreed on plastics treaty after breakthrough at Paris talks

**Delegates from 180 nations set out pathway to binding global agreement on tackling plastic pollution as soon as 2025**

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Nation-state representatives have taken the first concrete step toward a legally binding treaty to regulate plastic, described as the [most important green deal](#) since the 2015 international climate agreement.

The banging of a recycled-plastic gavel, on Friday night at Unesco headquarters in Paris, signalled the end of a fraught process, marked by accusations of [exclusion](#) and industrial lobbying. Talks threatened to fall apart, but in the end delegates were able to broadly agree on key elements that the treaty should contain, laying the groundwork for the future agreement.

Attended by delegates from 180 nations and dozens of stakeholders including civil society groups, [waste pickers](#) and a [coalition of scientists](#), the talks were the second of five meetings to thrash out the wording of the [new treaty](#), which could come into force in 2025.

The world produces almost [400m tonnes of plastic every year](#); an estimated [14m tonnes escape into the ocean annually](#). There is a growing recognition that this vast international problem requires a harmonised global response.

While plastic has historically been viewed as an environmental waste problem, critics now emphasise the array of harms this fossil-fuel-derived and chemical-rich product causes to the environment and human health across its entire lifecycle. The production of plastic has been shown to worsen air pollution, while its material waste [intensifies flooding](#) and [starves wildlife](#). Plastic particles are now found in the air, in drinking water and [in human blood](#).



📷 Small but deadly ... microplastic particles washed up on a beach.  
Photograph: Alistair Berg/Getty Images

Stakeholders used the talks to call for plans to manage microplastic pollution, regulate the thousands of [hazardous chemicals](#) baked into plastics, create a financial mechanism to support the transition, and protect the rights of people disproportionately exposed to plastic chemicals and waste, [such as those in “Cancer Alley”](#), a region in the US state of Louisiana with a high concentration of petrochemical plants along the Mississippi.

“We hear a lot about microplastics. But we get the impacts of plastic even smaller, as particulate matter,” says Jo Banner, co-founder of the nonprofit Descendants Project, which campaigns to support affected communities in Louisiana.

Many countries called for action to go beyond cutting plastic pollution, to curb production as well. Pacific Islands delegates led those calls, due to the unique challenge plastic brings to states such as the [Marshall Islands](#). These are too small to adequately manage and dispose of plastic waste, leaving mountainous waste dumps that have become the islands’ tallest peaks.



📷 The United Nations Environment Programme president, Espen Barth Eide, wields a recycled-plastic gavel at the Paris talks. Photograph: UNEP

“When things are moved across to the islands, who are the least suited to implement and enforce, the burden should not be placed on them,” said Sefanaia Nawadra, director general of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, an intergovernmental organisation representing the Pacific states. “That’s why we’re pushing for control on the upstream side.”

The talks began with fierce disagreements about procedure, which many civil society groups and country delegates, including prominent voices from Mexico, [claimed was a stalling tactic](#) by oil- and plastic-producing nations, including Saudi Arabia and Brazil, together with fossil fuel and petrochemical lobbyists.



However, a compromise postponed these procedural discussions to a later date, and observers to the closed-door negotiations said **widespread agreement** emerged on the potential core features of a future treaty. A majority of countries agreed that it should be global and legally binding, rather than voluntary.

Meanwhile, the WWF said that **94 of the 180 nations** in Paris had agreed that some especially harmful polymers, chemicals and plastic products - which might include intentionally added microplastics and **PFAs** (“forever chemicals”) - should be banned or phased out

“We clearly have plastic-producer countries and industries very determined to throw wrenches in the works, and at the same time a growing ambition to address this problem at the root,” said Sirine Rached of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives.



📷 The plastics treaty promises to make a 'positive difference'. Photograph: Mario De Moya/Alamy

The draft document will be written in the coming months as a springboard for granular discussions of the final treaty text. “This mandate was hard fought for, but at least provides a clear direction of travel towards starting to draft the plastics treaty in earnest,” said Christina Dixon, ocean campaign leader at the Environmental Investigation Agency.

Civil society and rights groups raised concerns about the lobbying influence of industry groups, including the American Chemistry Council and Plastics Europe. The French investigation newspaper Mediapart counted [190 industry representatives](#) at the Paris talks, while many other organisations, including groups of Indigenous leaders and waste pickers, were told at short notice by the United Nations Environment Programme that there would be limited space at the event.

Many are also concerned about the promotion of ideas such as [chemical recycling](#). This is often used to transform [plastics into fuel](#) in a process that produces significant carbon emissions.

The treaty has an unusually ambitious timescale for globally binding agreements, with the next round of talks in Kenya scheduled for this year, and the final agreement planned for late 2024.

“It’s clear that most governments in the world want this and are ready to put in place global regulations on plastics,” said Eirik Lindebjerg, a policy manager at WWF. “It’s a massive opportunity to create an environmental agreement that will really make a positive difference to people’s lives.”

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