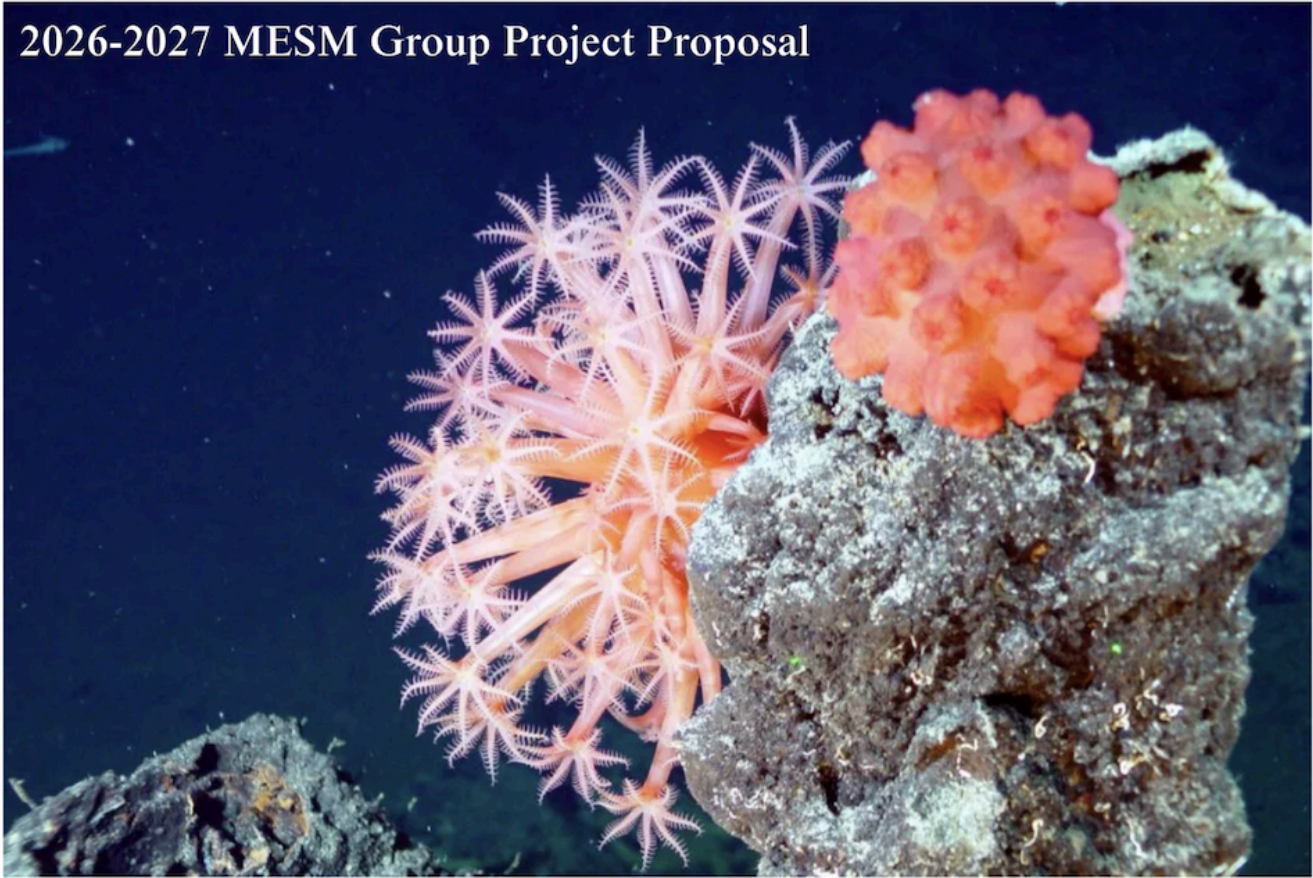




## 2026-2027 MESM Group Project Proposal



## A New Wave of High Seas Protections: Scoping Northern Seamount Ecosystems under the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement

Image Credit: NOAA - Ring of Fire 2002 Expedition.

### Proposal Authors:

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### Co-Clients: Oceans North and Marine Conservation Institute

- 1) Amy Irvine, [airvine@oceansnorth.ca](mailto:airvine@oceansnorth.ca), 1-204-612-0967, Oceans North
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## Objectives

Areas of the ocean beyond national jurisdiction, or the “high seas,” represent almost two-thirds of the world’s ocean and support significant amounts of global biodiversity (IUCN, 2022; O’Leary et al., 2020). With no single entity responsible for sustainable management of the high seas, the regulatory framework protecting these unique marine ecosystems has been fragmented (IUCN, 2022) and inadequate for the threats they are facing (O’Leary et al., 2020). Until now, there has been no international policy to conserve biodiversity in the high seas (Hannah et al., 2024). The newly ratified Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (“BBNJ Agreement”) is the first international treaty with an objective of conserving marine biodiversity in the high seas.

This project aims to:

1. **Analyze two areas for potential as Area-Based Management Tools (ABMTs) or Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) under the BBNJ Treaty:** Investigate how an ABMT or MPA proposal would proceed under the new BBNJ Agreement, including identifying relevant existing and required science, and Indigenous and local knowledge, focusing on two key marine habitats in the North Pacific and North Atlantic.
2. **Identify specific threats to seamounts in the North Pacific and North Atlantic:** Assess impacts and potential threats including fishing, deep sea mining potential, shipping, and other long-term impacts to the New England/Corner Rise Seamounts, located off the Gulf of Maine, and the Northeast Pacific Seamounts, located off of Canada and extending to Alaska.
3. **Assess relevant stakeholders and develop engagement strategies for potential protections under BBNJ Treaty:** Identify all stakeholders including countries, organizations, local communities, and Indigenous Peoples necessary for a full consultation for each site, and strategies for collaborating with potential allies and opponents of protections in these areas.

## Implications

Many international bodies exist for regulating the high seas but none have a primary purpose for conserving marine biodiversity (Berry, 2021). The BBNJ Agreement addresses this gap by convening countries, institutes, and frameworks to address high seas conservation collectively without undermining existing regulatory bodies. The new agreement is a critical tool for the world to work together to protect marine biodiversity, presenting both an opportunity and challenge for multilateral ocean management. This Group Project is extremely timely, as the BBNJ Agreement was fully ratified in Fall 2025 and just entered into force on January 17, 2026 (United Nations, 2023). Further, to meet the “30x30” conservation targets<sup>1</sup> set by the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework while fulfilling the legally required good faith and inclusive consultations, proposals for high seas MPAs or AMBTs must begin preparation immediately for implementation by 2030. As the first Conference of Parties convenes in Fall 2026, states will have less than three years to develop and approve the first proposals for high seas protections.

Areas beyond national jurisdiction reflected within the BBNJ Agreement encompass nearly 27,000 known species, with many more species still unknown (Ortuño Crespo et al., 2022). Furthermore, the high seas represent about 95% of the habitat occupied by life on Earth (United Nations, 2017). These areas are

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<sup>1</sup> These targets aim to conserve at least 30% of terrestrial, marine, and coastal areas important for biodiversity and ecosystem services by 2030, through well-connected systems of protected areas and other area-based conservation measures (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

critical for migratory marine species, including many commercial fish species like tuna; establishing protections for these species has been a persistent challenge as they often conflict with key industry areas (Santos et al., 2024; White & Costello, 2014). Indeed, biodiversity in the high seas faces multiple threats, particularly from fishing, maritime shipping, climate change and its impacts, pollution, and deep-sea mineral exploitation (O’Leary et al., 2020). This Group Project will identify existing and future threats in two geographic regions, the New England/Corner Rise Seamounts and the Northeast Pacific Seamounts. Seamounts are large underwater mountains which serve as critical, nutrient-rich habitats for deep-sea biodiversity (Barwegen et al., 2025). Currents around seamounts also bring nutrients up to the surface, creating feeding grounds for marine mammals, seabirds, and commercially important fish species (Barwegen et al., 2025). Despite their important role supporting diverse, endemic, and commercially valuable marine species, and contributing to global ocean currents and nutrient cycling, most seamounts have been inadequately protected because they are mainly found in areas beyond national jurisdiction (IUCN, 2017). Moreover, seamounts are highly vulnerable to overfishing and exploitation for deep sea mining (IUCN, 2017). This project aims to identify the threats per area to help contextualize how to best protect their biodiversity in the long-term.

Both the New England/Corner Rise Seamounts and the Northeast Pacific Seamounts have been the focus of previous conservation efforts, with one regional fisheries management organization (RFMO) restricting bottom trawling in each area (NAFO, 2024; NPFC, 2025). However, neither seamount region has been fully protected. To put forward a proposal for these regions to be protected and managed under the BBNJ Treaty, more research is needed on existing and potential fishing activity, shipping patterns, and deep-sea minerals around each habitat, as these activities may challenge MPA or ABMT designation (O’Leary et al., 2018). This project aims to coalesce science into a proposal that will be useful for the Government of Canada, and identify major threats that will be relevant for RFMOs that have overlapping regulatory areas. This project is an international collaboration between Oceans North (Canada-based) and the Marine Conservation Institute (U.S.-based) with additional likely collaboration from the Natural Resource Defense Council. The cross-border outcomes will serve as a framework for other ABMT/MPA proposals, exemplifying how successful collaborations will be required for advancing proposal development.

## **Equity**

The BBNJ Agreement is the first treaty of its kind embedded with Traditional Ecological Knowledge and emphasizes the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the ABMT/MPA proposal process (United Nations, 2023). This project will incorporate equity by identifying and engaging with key community and Traditional Knowledge holders to ensure their input shapes the ABMT/MPA proposals for each seamount area. Additionally, this project has implications of protecting the American eel, a culturally important species to First Nations, listed on the IUCN endangered species list (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2025). Oceans North has a decade-long history of collaboration with Indigenous and coastal communities in the Arctic and North Atlantic, and has existing frameworks for Indigenous-led conservation within their work. Oceans North is supporting efforts to understand the importance of the high seas to Pacific Indigenous Peoples, particularly the Council of the Haida Nation, Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council, Pacheedaht First Nation and Quatsino First Nation who have also been very engaged in large scale offshore protections within the Canadian exclusive economic zone. For this project, we will also seek to engage Alaskan Indigenous Peoples, as the seamounts of interest are adjacent to U.S. state and federal waters.

For the east coast, significant work was done to engage Indigenous communities to secure the New England Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument in the US, adjacent to the New England/Corner Rise seamounts on the high seas. We propose to build on that knowledge by working alongside the person responsible for that Indigenous Peoples outreach in that campaign to help us identify and develop connections with relevant Atlantic Indigenous communities.

### **Available Data**

- Data is available from RFMO websites, and Oceans North can provide contacts to specific individuals for additional data if required.
- Baseline data for these habitats is available through sites such as [aquamaps.org](http://aquamaps.org) for species richness, [globalfishingwatch.org](http://globalfishingwatch.org) for identified and verified fishers, and [GEBCO.net](http://GEBCO.net) for bathymetry data. Oceans North can provide shipping traffic data for both areas.
- Marine Conservation Institute's [MPAtlas](http://MPAtlas) and [High Seas Protection Tracker](http://High Seas Protection Tracker) tools provide an overview of existing management measures at these sites.
- Additional data resources will be shared by clients on demand when needed.

### **Possible Approach**

- Conduct a review of scientific literature and existing policy frameworks, and identify all relevant stakeholders—including local and Indigenous communities—for each seamount area. Synthesize data on cultural keystone species for Indigenous communities and incorporate this into the report.
- Attend discussions and symposiums with relevant research scientists and experts that can advise on the existing efforts within the two key seamount habitats.
- Apply Marine Conservation Institute's High Seas Protection Tracker to map current ocean uses, activities, and management measures in each seamount region.

In support of these efforts, Oceans North will provide an outline of relevant science and policy consultation needed for potential ABMTs to meet BBNJ requirements. Marine Conservation Institute will provide guidance on “best practices” for MPAs proposed under the BBNJ Agreement to reach full or high levels of protection, informed by *The MPA Guide*, the Blue Park Standard, and the IUCN Greenlist.

### **Deliverables**

In addition to the final report, executive summary, and presentation, the project will produce:

- Report of existing science, threats, and relevant stakeholders within these sites, following the BBNJ Agreement's ABMT proposal legal requirements and science-informed best practice for fully and highly protected MPAs on the High Seas.
- Map of existing management measures within key sites including RFMOs, the International Seabed Authority, the International Maritime Organization, and Regional Seas Conventions.
- Tentative workshop with Oceans North and the Government of Canada that shares all relevant science, commercial interests, and community involvement for these two sites.

### **Internships**

Oceans North aims to support two paid internships for Summer 2026; final internship details are pending upcoming funding. The project team anticipates a funding decision as soon as March.

### **Budget and Justification**

This project should not need funding beyond the given \$1,000 from the Bren School.

## Supporting Information:

### Citations

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United Nations. (2017). *The Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction: A Technical Abstract of the First Global Integrated Marine Assessment*.

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#### **Acronyms**

- **ABMT:** Area-Based Management Tools
- **BBNJ:** Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction
- **MPA:** Marine Protected Area
- **RFMO:** Regional Fisheries Management Organizations

#### **Budget and Justification:**

This project should not need funding beyond the given \$1,000 from the Bren School.

#### **Client Letters of Support:**

*Letters start on the next page.*

January 19, 2026



Group Project Committee  
Bren School of Environmental Science and Management  
2400 Bren Hall  
UC Santa Barbara, CA 93106

Dear Group Project Committee:

I am writing on behalf of Marine Conservation Institute to describe our support of the Bren School Group Project proposal, "A New Wave of High Seas Protections: Scoping Northern Seamount Ecosystems under the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement." This proposal was written in collaboration with Alexandra Brown-Law and Julia Anderson—two current Bren School students—and Oceans North, an organization that Marine Conservation Institute has worked with closely in the past.

To ensure the success of this project, Marine Conservation Institute will work closely with the students and with partners at Oceans North, particularly on the analysis of how the two focus areas—High Seas Seamounts in the North Atlantic and North Pacific—could be fully or highly protected under the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement through the designation of area based management tools (ABMTs), such as marine protected areas (MPAs).

Our support will mainly be derived from two of our existing projects: 1) The High Seas Protection Tracker, a tool that shows data on current ABMTs in areas beyond national jurisdiction, which we will support the students to use when assessing current projections in the two focus sites (and provide any additional data sets as needed); and 2) "Best Practices" for highly effective MPAs proposed under the BBNJ Agreement, using current MPA assessment frameworks that we have co-developed such as *The MPA Guide* and The Blue Park Standard.

We may be able to support Oceans North in funding two summer internships for the students and will look into funding sources to do so. Regardless of whether we can fund the internships, our staff will fully support the project while the students are completing their internships with Oceans North. We will rely on current grant funding for our High Seas Conservation Program to contribute staff time.

Thank you in advance for considering this proposal and please let us know if you require any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lance Morgan".

Dr. Lance Morgan  
President  
Marine Conservation Institute



**OCEANS  
NORTH**

1459 Hollis St, Suite 101, Halifax, NS, B3J 1V1  
[www.oceansnorth.org](http://www.oceansnorth.org)

January 19, 2026

**Re: Client Letter to support hiring two UCSB Bren School of Environmental Science & Management student interns: Alle Brown-Law and Julia Anderson**

To the Group Project Committee:

Please accept this letter as support for hiring two summer interns from the UCSB Bren Master's program for the project: "A New Wave of High Seas Protections: Scoping Northern Seamount Ecosystems under the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement". This project will be coordinated by Oceans North, in collaboration with the Marine Conservation Institute (MCI), with additional potential for collaboration with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

With the BBNJ Treaty entering into force on January 17, 2026, this project is timely. Investigating how two priority seamount habitats in the North Atlantic and North Pacific may proceed as Area-Based Management Tools or Marine Protected Area proposals under this treaty will help develop a pathway by which multilateral spatial protection procedures could proceed. This project will help facilitate collaboration among countries to attain their global commitment for 30% of coastal and ocean protection by 2030, following the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by members to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity in 2022.

Oceans North could allocate resources from existing funding to partially cover the internship of these two students for the summer of 2026. Additional funding we applied to is pending and will be announced late March. Combined, these grants would contribute to the internship salary and deliverables of both students.

Oceans North and MCI will work together to provide the necessary resources and guidance throughout the internship, and direct and connect them to additional relevant resources when needed. Types of data the students will be analyzing include species richness, bathymetry, transportation, fishery closure reports, ocean noise data, and other relevant spatial data. Existing data that has been collected by Oceans North (e.g., region-specific shipping tracks) may be shared for the students to analyze types of vessel pressures occurring in the research areas – confirmation on whether an NDA disclosure is needed for this data will be provided upon project selection or at our earliest convenience. Other resources will be shared through connecting the students to the relevant staff at Oceans

North and MCI, and additional project costs will be covered by Oceans North in collaboration with MCI.

We look forward to working with the Bren student team on this project should it be selected. If there are any questions, please contact Ernesto Fernandez Monge, the International Oceans Director ([efernandezmonge@oceansnorth.ca](mailto:efernandezmonge@oceansnorth.ca); 1-902-449-4083).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susanna Fuller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Susanna" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Fuller".

Susanna Fuller,  
Vice President, Conservation and Projects  
Oceans North