

## **Deep-Sea Mining: A Scandal About to Erupt**

**Article by Monica Verbeek**

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The health of the ocean is central to future-proofing the planet against the impact of climate change. But a meeting of states and industrial interests in Jamaica this summer could put all of this at risk if it gives the green light to deep-sea mining.

We know more about the surface of the Moon than we do about the deep sea. Yet the surging demand for metals for products such as smartphones and electric vehicle batteries is driving the mining industry into the planet's final frontier. Scientists warn that deep-sea mining could lead to large-scale and irreversible biodiversity loss due to ecosystem fragmentation and destruction, noise and light pollution, and the release of sediment plumes mixed with toxic wastewater that would spread far beyond mining sites. Despite this, the Jamaica-based International Seabed Authority (ISA) – an intergovernmental body responsible for the international seabed – has already been handing out exploration licences covering some one million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean to mining companies. It could begin granting large-scale deep-sea mining exploitation contracts as early as this summer.

In June 2021, the small Oceanian state of Nauru invoked a provision compelling ISA to issue environmental regulations for deep-sea mining in international waters within two years. Nauru is the state sponsor of one of the subsidiaries of The Metals Company, a Canadian corporation that intends to extract metals-rich nodules from the Pacific seabed. If ISA has not issued its regulations by the end of this two-year period, mining operations could be allowed to go ahead.

As of today, 14 states have joined calls for a precautionary pause, moratorium, or outright ban on deep-sea mining. European institutions, industry stakeholders, banks, and hundreds of parliamentarians, scientists, and civil society organisations from around the world have also taken strong positions against deep-sea mining. The European Investment Bank, for instance, has included the “extraction of mineral deposits from the deep sea” on its list of bank-wide excluded activities, considering it unacceptable in both climate and environmental terms.

Also taking a stance against deep-sea mining are some of the very companies that the mining industry claims are reliant on this harmful practice being given the green light. BMW, Renault, Scania, Volvo, and Volkswagen have committed to excluding deep-sea metals from their production chains, breaking apart the myth that deep-sea mining is needed to provide materials for the transition to cleaner electric vehicles.

### **The unsustainability of deep-sea mining**

In a recent policy brief, Seas At Risk, an umbrella association of environmental NGOs from across Europe, demonstrated how pushing forward with deep-sea mining would put the European Union at direct odds with European and international commitments to fight climate change, biodiversity loss, and inequalities, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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The blue lung of the planet, the ocean is central to the global fight against climate change, locking away 25 per cent of all carbon we emit – some 2 billion tonnes per year – and 93 per cent of the heat trapped by greenhouse gas emissions. Deep-sea mining threatens to release carbon sequestered for millions of years in the seabed, interfere with the planet's main carbon sink, and harm carbon-fixing organisms such as phytoplankton, all of which play a key role in regulating the climate and marine geochemistry.

By destroying and driving species to extinction, deep-sea mining would also prevent the development of new medical products associated with life forms present only in the deep ocean. A well-known example is the Covid-19 test, which uses an enzyme isolated from a microbe found in deep-water hydrothermal vents now targeted for sulphide mining. Covid-19- and cancer-fighting chemicals have also been found in sea sponges and marine bacteria. Destroying such species and ecosystems before we are able to discover and understand them could prevent future medical breakthroughs.

Lastly, deep-sea mining would work against efforts to preserve the ocean's biodiversity and food webs for the benefit of local communities.

## **Green tech – a gateway to deep-sea mining?**

Eyes are also on the EU when it comes to marrying the green transition with its overconsumption of raw materials. Although European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton has highlighted that “the cheapest and cleanest raw material is the one we don't use”, the Commission's proposed Critical Raw Materials Regulation, announced in March 2023, failed to address the need to reduce demand as a keystone component of EU raw materials policy. Even more worryingly, the text as it stands does not explicitly rule out deep-sea exploitation. Projects considered to be in the “public interest” could be fast-tracked. To prevent the push for green technology setting the EU on a path towards deep-sea mining and to reverse the general push for more mining, the Commission should introduce a “material footprint” for these finite metals and set binding reduction targets. A stronger focus on resource efficiency and urban mining, i.e. the process of recovering critical materials from discarded electronic equipment, would also contribute to the goal of secured, sustainable access to raw materials without continuing to exceed planetary boundaries.

According to the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, an alliance of over 100 organisations promoting the conservation of biodiversity on the high seas, deep-sea mining is “not worth the risk”. Why, then, is it being considered? A closer look at ISA might help to answer this question.

## **ISA and the dodgy truth about deep-sea governance**

In the past, ISA has often been caught up in scandals involving dodgy deals, conflicts of interest, and leaks of confidential information to the mining industry. All levels of its governance and decision-making processes evade transparency, from attempts to exclude non-profits and journalists from meetings to the fact that a small group mostly made up of geologists and lawyers takes closed-door decisions on critical environmental issues using data that is not made public. While ISA's Legal and Technical Commission has a say on environmental issues, its members are designated by states that often have a vested

interest in deep-sea mining and the lucrative contracts that are up for grabs. The ISA too has a vested interest as it receives money for each licence granted.

As calls for hitting the pause button on deep-sea mining grow, so does the urgency surrounding this issue. Once huge investments in deep-sea mining operations have been made, it will be next to impossible to put the genie back in the bottle, to catastrophic effect.

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