

Easier for institutes to dive into ocean research with new treaty

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Local institutes of higher learning and maritime companies will have more opportunities to study the world's vast oceans in the wake of a new treaty which ensures that sharing this common global resource is enshrined into law.

Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said on Tuesday that the outcomes of this landmark treaty were relevant and beneficial for Singapore, as it codified scientific best practices across jurisdictions.

He was responding to a question in Parliament on the Treaty on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ).

Negotiations on the BBNJ treaty were concluded on March 4.

Dr Balakrishnan added that the treaty also allows the world to use the oceans, the seas, and marine resources for sustainable development, as well as work towards the global target of protecting 30 per

cent of the world's land, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans by 2030.

For 15 years, United Nations member states had been negotiating rules on the "high seas" – the waters more than 200 nautical miles from the coastlines, including the seabed and the airspace above.

The high seas cover close to half of the earth's surface and are shared by all nations under international law.

This means the nations have equal rights to the ocean and can conduct fishing activities and scientific research there.

However, only a few states have so far taken advantage of these opportunities.

The treaty seeks to address some of the inequalities in the ability of different states to manage and use resources beyond national jurisdiction, said Dr Balakrishnan.

"It provides for greater and more equitable sharing of the benefits arising from marine scientific research in these areas for all coun-

tries, and it will boost capacity building efforts for developing countries to better conserve and to sustainably use their marine biodiversity," he added.

Dr Balakrishnan also expressed his pride that a Singaporean, Ms Rena Lee, who is Singapore's Ambassador for Oceans and Law of the Sea Issues, had presided over the five intergovernmental conference sessions from 2018 to 2023, which successfully led to the conclusion of negotiations.

"Rena's tireless leadership in this long and arduous process brought countries together towards achieving a consensus outcome. It reaffirms Singapore's position on the global stage as a trusted interlocutor and a bridge builder," he added.

He pointed out that the successful conclusion of negotiations showed that multilateralism remains effective and relevant.

Through the treaty, Dr Balakrishnan said, local scientists from the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum at the National University of Singapore, as well as agencies

such as the Agency for Science, Technology and Research and the National Research Foundation, will find it easier to access information and samples of marine organisms for their research.

Maritime companies will also have access to deep sea samples, creating new opportunities for the research and development sector.

He added that Singapore can also contribute to the treaty in a variety of ways, such as by working with other countries and organisations towards its effective implementation.

In the longer term, Singapore can support capacity building efforts for developing countries by sharing its experience and expertise.

Dr Balakrishnan said that the treaty enables a more holistic regulation of the marine environment, which is currently fragmented across different regional and sectoral organisations such as fisheries management and maritime shipping.

It will also fill some regulatory gaps and promote coordination

across "different regional and sectoral" bodies and provide greater clarity on what is required for the assessment of the environmental impacts activities have in these areas.

Responding to a question from Mr Dennis Tan (Hougang) on how the Government would encourage and ensure that Singaporean businesses source sustainable fisheries and undersea mining in compliance with the requirements of the convention, Dr Balakrishnan said the challenge is to get countries to ratify the text and implement the treaty.

"It will require – at the domestic level – policies, legislation and programmes. I will not underestimate the effort needed to persuade everyone to come on board," he added.

He pointed to the importance of having people both in Singapore and around the world understand why the oceans, marine biodiversity, the seabed and various natural resources are worthy of protection, which is something that requires political support.



Dr Vivian Balakrishnan said through the BBNJ treaty, local scientists and agencies will find it easier to access data and samples for their research.

Transparency would also be key in ensuring that countries comply with the rules of the treaty, given that these are areas beyond their national jurisdiction, said Dr Balakrishnan.

"I will not trivialise how difficult it will be to hold people to account. But I believe that if there is broad-based public support in all countries and we have a system with sufficient transparency, so you know which companies, which institutions, (are doing) what they're doing and the impact of their activities – then I think transparency will help ensure compliance," he added.

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