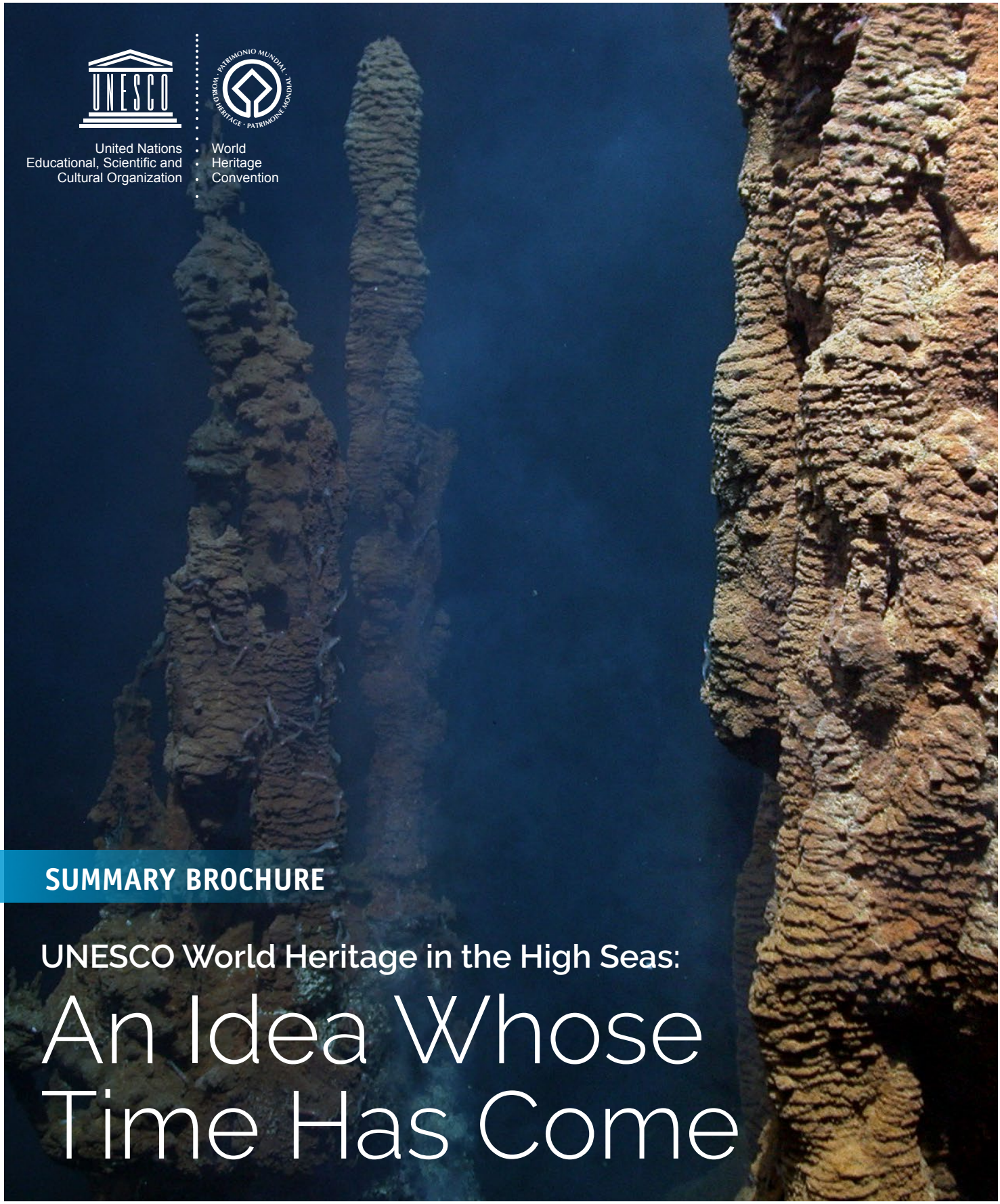
United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

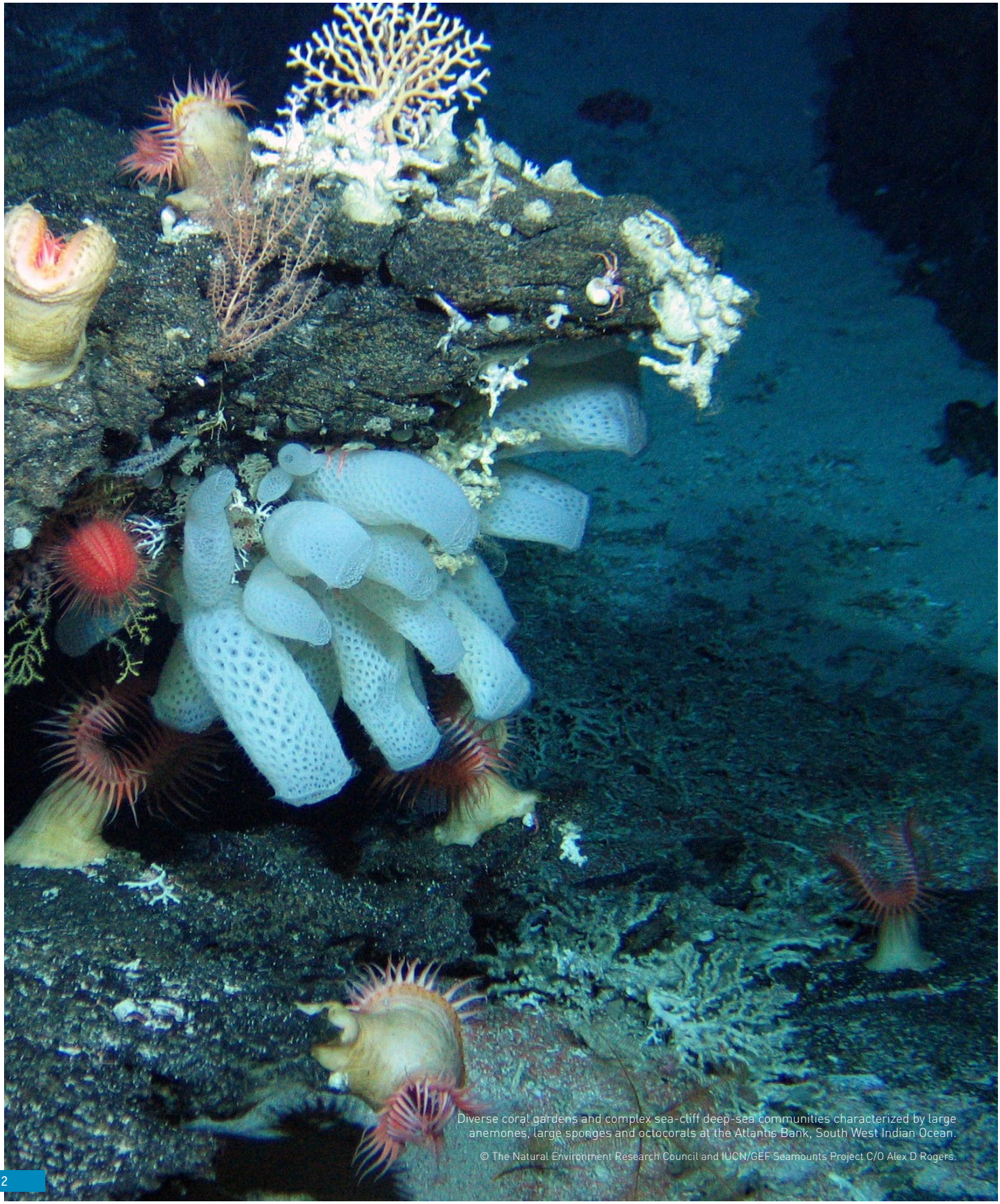
World
Heritage
Convention



SUMMARY BROCHURE

UNESCO World Heritage in the High Seas:

An Idea Whose Time Has Come



Diverse coral gardens and complex sea-cliff deep-sea communities characterized by large anemones, large sponges and octocorals at the Atlantis Bank, South West Indian Ocean.

World Heritage and the High Seas

World Heritage Context

Nearly two-thirds of the ocean lies beyond the jurisdiction of nations. Yet none of these areas are currently protected through the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

In 2011, the External Auditor recommended to *"Reflect upon appropriate means to preserve sites that correspond to conditions of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), which are not dependent on the sovereignty of States Parties."*

Following the 2012-2022 Strategic Action Plan for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre's Marine Programme and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) jointly prepared the scientific and legal groundwork toward the possible designation of marine World Heritage sites in the High Seas. This brochure provides an overview of that work undertaken between 2015 and 2021.

What are the High Seas?

The term 'marine areas beyond national jurisdiction' describes both seabed areas beyond national jurisdiction as well as the water column above them, more than 200 nautical miles from the coast. This ocean area is commonly referred to as the 'High Seas', and covers nearly 50% of the Earth.

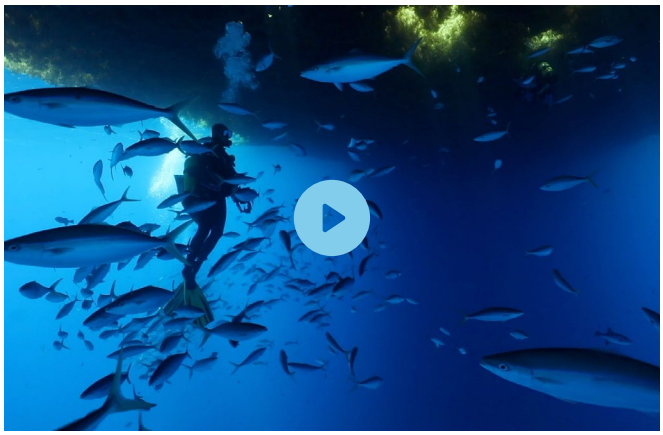
Independent evaluation
by the UNESCO External Auditor on the implementation of the Global Strategy for a credible, balanced and representative World Heritage List

https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2011/whc11-35com-INF9Ae.pdf#page=23

Why are there currently no World Heritage sites in the High Seas?

In 1972, when the UNESCO World Heritage Convention was adopted, international environmental law was at an early stage. At that time, there was no widespread knowledge, or understanding, of the significance of many ecosystems far from land and deep beneath the ocean.

For example, hydrothermal vents were only discovered in the late 1970s, and the elusive giant squid was only filmed in its natural habitat in 2012. It is difficult to imagine that the founders' farsighted vision of World Heritage protection envisaged a future world where we intentionally or accidentally ended up excluding half the surface of the earth – the High Seas.



https://whc.unesco.org/en/highseas

The High Seas covers half of the world, yet currently includes no World Heritage sites.

Why is it urgent?

The High Seas harbour exceptional places, many still unknown to science. Some of these places are not even powered by the light of the sun, like everything else on Earth, but by heat and energy emerging from the Earth. Unique forms of life so extreme they form pivotal case studies for space agencies, and help to plan future missions to distant planets in search for life, or spur innovation for the next generation of disease treatments. This natural heritage, which has long been preserved due to its isolation and the difficulty in exploiting its resources, is now threatened by deep-sea mining, maritime traffic, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, pollution, and climate change.

Since September 2018, States are negotiating in New York through an Intergovernmental Conference on an international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. Three negotiating sessions have now taken place, with a final session planned in 2021.

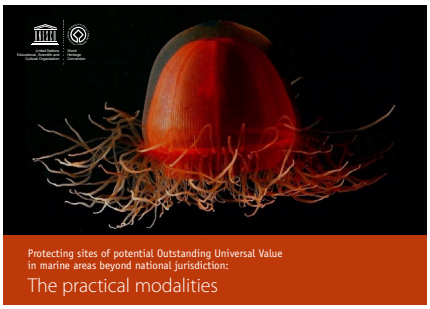
What is needed to safeguard unique sites in the High Seas through the UNESCO World Heritage Convention?

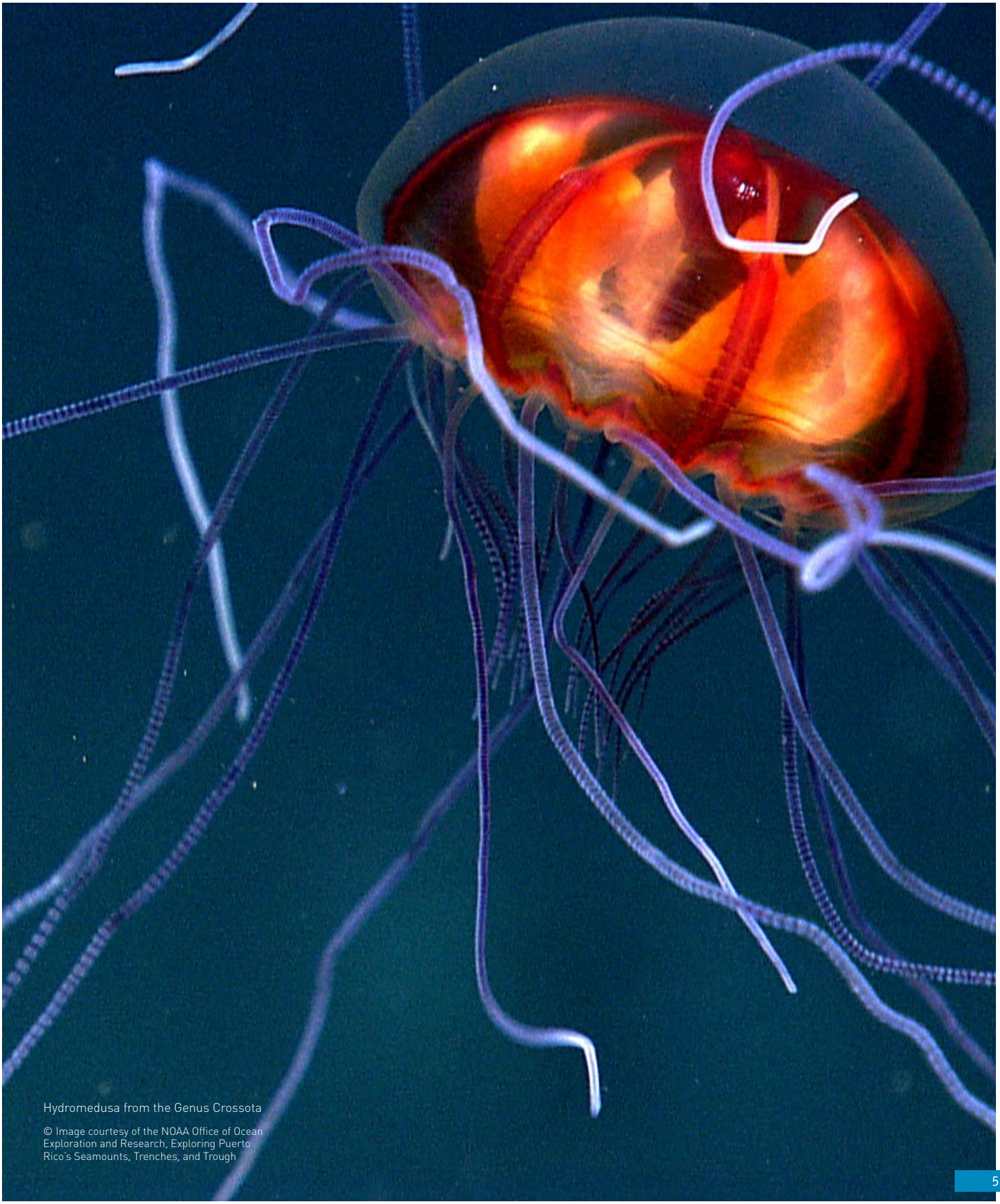
Experts concluded that nothing in the text of the 1972 World Heritage Convention suggests that sites of potential OUV in the High Seas are excluded from its ambit. The lack of specific provisions is rather a historical oversight that may be corrected through a review of the Operational Guidelines. The technical modalities about how to nominate and inscribe a site on the World Heritage List, how to ensure adequate protection, and who is responsible for reporting, are specified in the Operational Guidelines. These are regularly updated and revised by the World Heritage Committee. A 2018 legal expert meeting in Monaco suggested that the next revision could include targeted amendments to facilitate the nomination, inscription, management and international oversight of sites in the High Seas. Under any scenario, a system for the protection of World Heritage sites in the High Seas will need international cooperation, both with the relevant competent international organizations and States Parties.

The practical modalities

UNESCO convened an expert workshop in Monaco from 11-12 December 2018 to discuss possible practical modalities for how the 1972 World Heritage Convention could protect marine sites in the High Seas. The meeting proceedings summarize the findings of the expert workshop.

http://whc.unesco.org/document/181721





Hydromedusa from the Genus Crossota

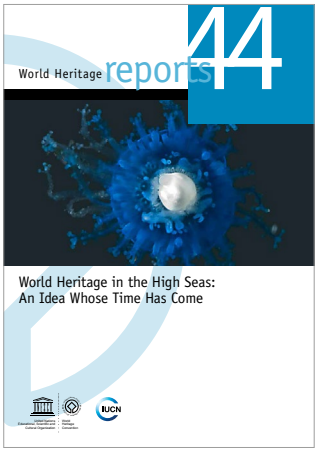
Illustrations of potential Outstanding Universal Value in the High Seas

Since the inscription of the Great Barrier Reef in 1981, the collection of marine sites on the World Heritage list has grown into a global network of 50 places of OUV across 37 nations. None of these are located in the High Seas. The 2016 UNESCO-IUCN Report illustrated what places of potential OUV in the High Seas could look like. Imagine a world with sunken fossilized islands covered in great diversity of corals and other marine life. Giant volcanoes forming vast seamounts that can all but dwarf the tallest mountains on land. A 'floating golden rainforest' on the ocean surface with its own unique creatures. Or even a deep dark place with 60-metre-high white spires of rock that looks like a lost city beneath the waves.

While this research has focused on natural marine features and ecosystems, nothing would prevent the identification of cultural sites in the High Seas at a later stage.

Learn about the 50 marine sites
already inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List

http://whc.unesco.org/en/marine-programme/

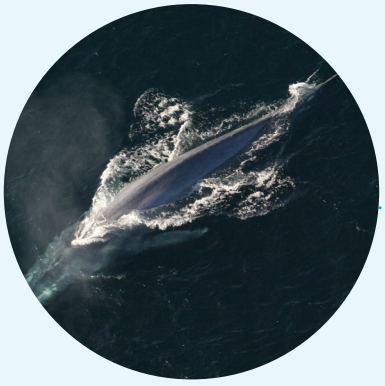


World Heritage in the High Seas: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

In 2015, UNESCO, in consultation with IUCN, convened an expert meeting in Paris with leading authorities on policy, international law, the ecology and geology of marine areas beyond national jurisdiction, and World Heritage. Building on discussions at the expert meeting, a joint UNESCO-IUCN Report was published in 2016. The report illustrated a sample of the potential OUV present in the High Seas, and provided initial reflection on options for enabling nomination and inscription. The report is available in English, French and Spanish.

http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002454/245467e.pdf

The White Shark Café



The Costa Rica Thermal Dome

The Sargasso Sea

The Lost City Hydrothermal Field

The Atlantis Bank

50 marine sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (January 2020)

Illustrations of potential Outstanding Universal Value in the High Seas

Caption and © in chronological order: Great white shark at Isla Guadalupe, Mexico, August 2006. Animal estimated at 11-12 feet (3.3 to 3.6 m) in length, age unknown. Pterantula (Terry Goss) via Wikimedia Commons // Adult blue whale (Balaenoptera musculus). Image courtesy of NOAA Photo Library via Wikimedia Commons (Public domain) // Phaeophyceae: Sargassum seaweed. Oliver S/Shutterstock.com"// The three-story-tall actively venting carbonate tower called IMAX protrudes from the north face of a much larger edifice called Poseidon in the Lost City Hydrothermal Field. Poseidon rises ~60 m above the surrounding seafloor. The area has been active for >120,000 years. D.S. Kelley and M. Elend, School of Oceanography, University of Washington // Diverse coral gardens and complex sea-cliff deep-sea communities characterized by large anemones, large sponges and octocorals at the Atlantis Bank, South West Indian Ocean. The Natural Environment Research Council and IUCN/GEF Seamounts Project. C/O Alex D Rogers.

Illustrations of potential OUV in the High Seas

1

The Lost City Hydrothermal Field

The Lost City Hydrothermal Field is a remarkable geobiological feature (biotope) in the deep sea (700-800 metre water depth) that is unlike any other ecosystem yet known on Earth. The site, dominated by the Poseidon carbonate monolith (a 60-metre high carbonate edifice), was discovered serendipitously in 2000 during an Alvin dive on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, and it is still being explored.

2

The Costa Rica Thermal Dome

The Costa Rica Thermal Dome is a unique oceanic oasis, a wind-driven upwelling system, which forms a highly productive area and a critical habitat, which provides singular spawning sites, migration pathways and feeding grounds to multiple endangered and commercially important species.

3

The White Shark Café

The White Shark Café is a pristine open ocean region approximately halfway between the North American mainland and Hawaii that is the site for the only known offshore aggregation of north Pacific white sharks. The Café provides a unique offshore habitat where these irreplaceable marine predators congregate in cobalt blue pristine waters.

4

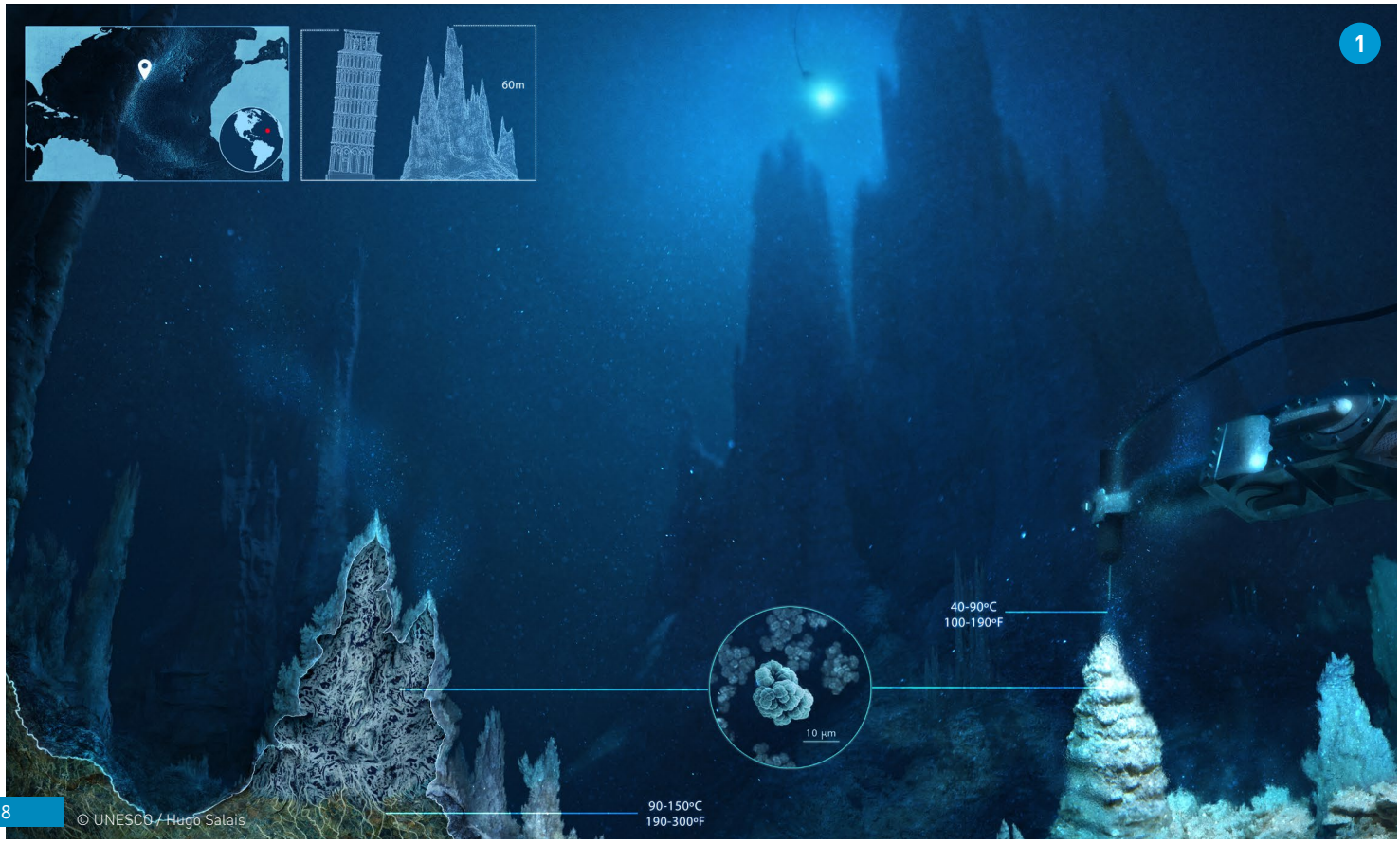
The Sargasso Sea

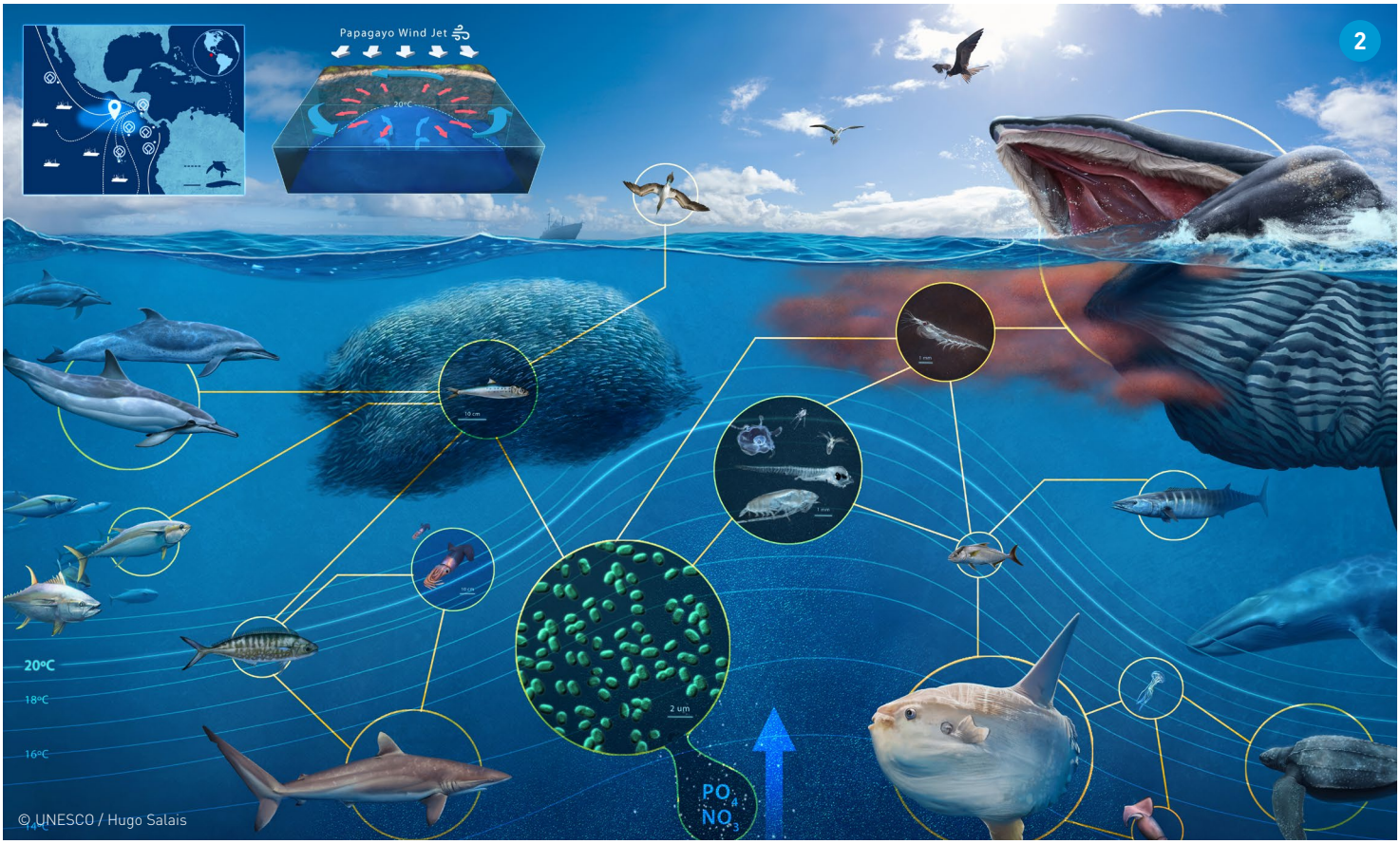
The 'Golden Floating Rainforest of the Ocean', the Sargasso Sea, is home to an iconic pelagic ecosystem built around the floating Sargassum seaweeds, the world's only holopelagic algae. It was first viewed by Columbus on his first voyage in 1492 and has been a place of myth and legend ever since. Its global importance derives from a combination of physical and oceanographic structures, its complex pelagic ecosystems, and its role in global ocean and earth system processes.

5

The Atlantis Bank

The Atlantis Bank, located within sub-tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, was the first tectonic sunken fossil island ever studied. The complex geomorphology of old headlands, precipitous cliffs, stacks, beaches and lagoons harbours a very diverse deep-sea fauna at depths from 700 to 4,000 metres characterized by large anemones, large armchair-sized sponges, and octocorals. Large Paragorgia colonies are particularly notable.

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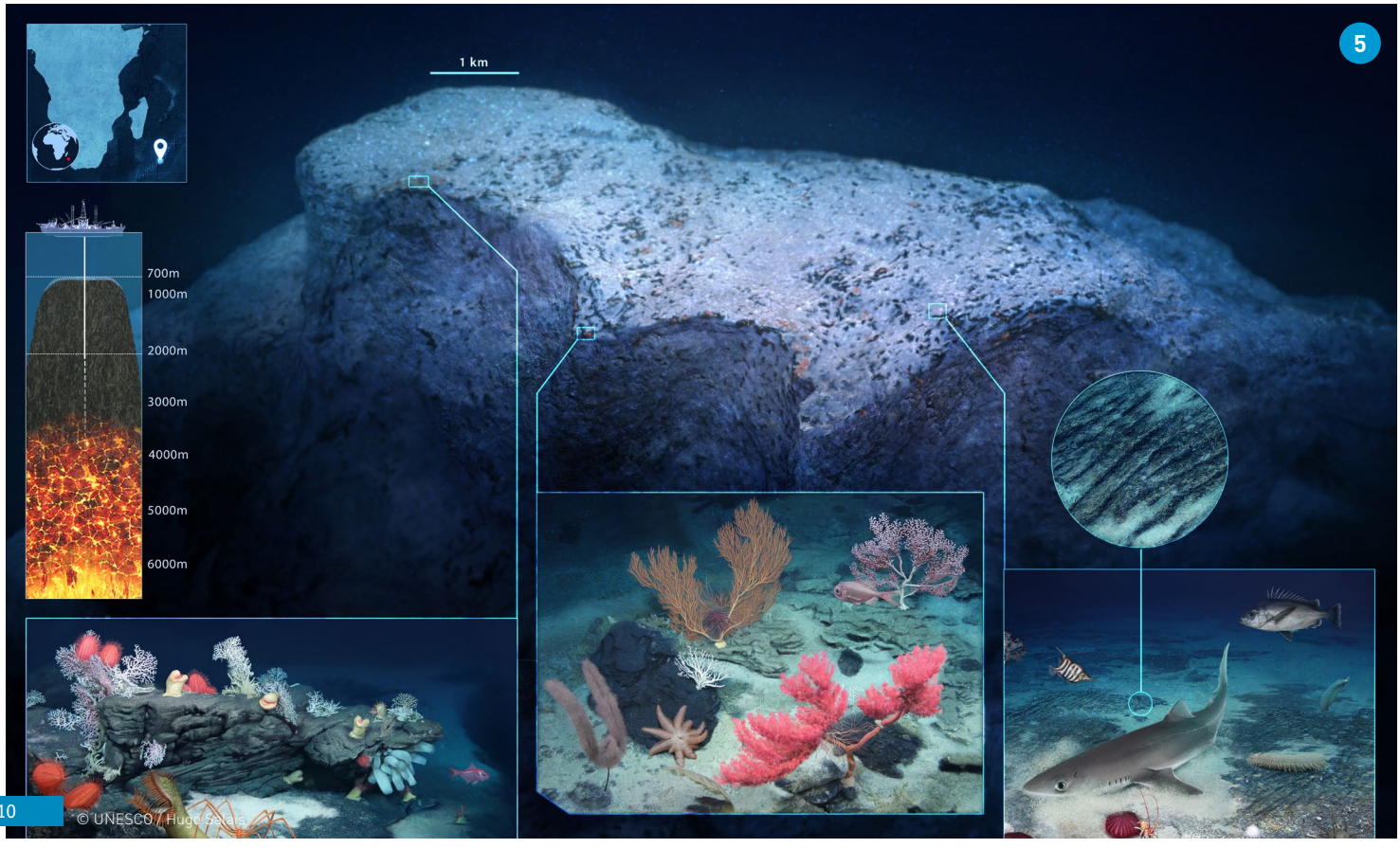
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© UNESCO / Hugo Salais

Suggested **Next Steps***

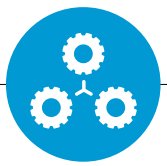
The **World Heritage Committee** may wish to decide that the Operational Guidelines require revision to remedy the historical oversight that has prevented the designation of UNESCO World Heritage sites in the High Seas so far.

Revised **Operational Guidelines** could provide clarification regarding the process of nomination, protection and evaluation/reporting of UNESCO World Heritage sites in the High Seas.

States Parties could harmonize their **Tentative Lists** to address thematic and regional gaps.

International Assistance may be requested for the purpose of preparing, updating and harmonizing Tentative Lists.

Initial efforts could be focused on two areas, the Costa Rica Thermal Dome and the Sargasso Sea, with a view of advancing the UNESCO World Heritage Convention toward nominating and protecting marine areas of OUV in the High Seas.



Develop a **work programme and budget** for the World Heritage Centre to support the next steps.

* As suggested by the 2018 legal expert meeting.

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Published in 2021 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

Cover photo: White bacterial carpet (foreground) and Alvinocarididae shrimp (background) on black smoker chimneys, at the Mariner vent field along the Eastern Lau Spreading Center. The approximate depth of these vent fields range between 2,000 and 3,000 meters. Photographs were captured using the remotely operated vehicle (ROV) Jason II, deployed the research vessel (R/V) Melville in 2006.

Graphic design: Aurelia Mazoyer

Typeset: UNESCO/MSS/CLD/D

Printed by: UNESCO

Printed in France

With the support of:

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OFFICE FRANÇAIS
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