

▶ The Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea began in 1974. It largely stemmed from the need to fill gaps in existing international legislation which did not cover these new uses of the sea.

However, by this time many new States which had played no part in the formulation of traditional maritime law had achieved independence. They had also become aware of the importance of their offshore resources for providing food supplies and as a means of economic and social development.

Growing attention was also being paid to problems of protecting the sea's living resources and the marine environment and of defending national sovereignty. All these factors led the U.N. Member States to agree on the need for negotiations to create a legal framework for dealing with such questions and to ensure that the uses of the oceans should not become a constant source of tension and conflict but develop harmoniously in a climate of mutual respect.

One of the major themes under discussion is the prospection and utilization of the minerals of the seabed beyond the area of national jurisdiction. The international community now accepts that these resources are part of the common heritage of mankind and should therefore not be appropriated by only those countries which have the immediate capacity to extract them.

They should be administered by an international authority, still to be set up, in which all States would be represented on an equal footing.

The proposed International Sea-Bed Authority would be a revolutionary innovation within the United Nations family. It would be governed by the new concepts underlying international relations: the exploitation of the area beyond national jurisdiction should be for peaceful purposes only, and the benefits shared equitably among all States, with particular emphasis on the needs of the developing countries.

However, the industrially-developed countries have reservations about some of these proposals: in the last few years multinational companies have made massive investments in perfecting technologies for exploiting the sea-bed nodules as a major source of manganese, copper, nickel, cobalt and other minerals.

On another important question—the adoption of a 200-mile economic zone—there is more or less general agreement. In this zone coastal States would have various powers including exclusive jurisdiction over living resources, with the right to determine the size of the total allowable catch and the unused surplus that could be granted to another state by inter-party agreement.

The 200-mile limit would be a step towards better redistribution of the uses of the living resources of the sea, by restricting the major sea

powers—hitherto guilty of over-fishing many species—in their access to the coastal waters of other states.

Contrary to what has happened up to now, coastal States would at last have control over the resources of their offshore waters in a 200-mile zone—and this, for the developing countries, is a matter of fundamental importance.

In fact, with this extension of national jurisdiction, one-third of the oceans will cease to be considered as the high seas (subject to the principle of "freedom of the seas") and will come under the coastal States' jurisdiction.

The international and regional fishing organizations to which interested States belong, and which are responsible for managing the resources of specific areas, will continue to play a big role in promoting scientific co-operation, collecting and distributing information and also in developing technical assistance to enable coastal States to make full use of the resources in their zones.

This co-operation is particularly necessary since some migratory species such as tunny move over a wide range through the economic zones of several States.

Agreement on these issues will only be possible if other States are given certain vital guarantees such as freedom of navigation, overflight and under-water cable-laying for communication, as long as these guarantees in no way prevent the coastal States

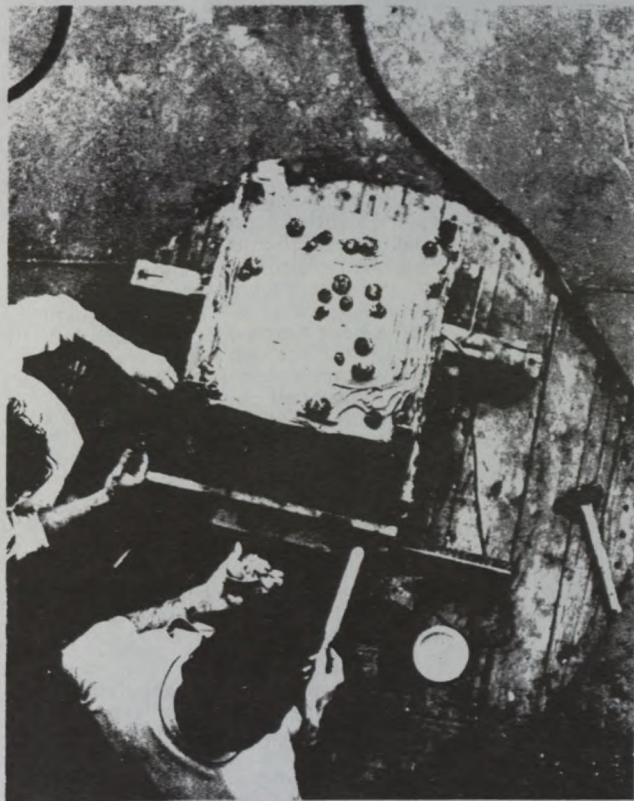


Photo C. Yvon Balut, Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises, Paris

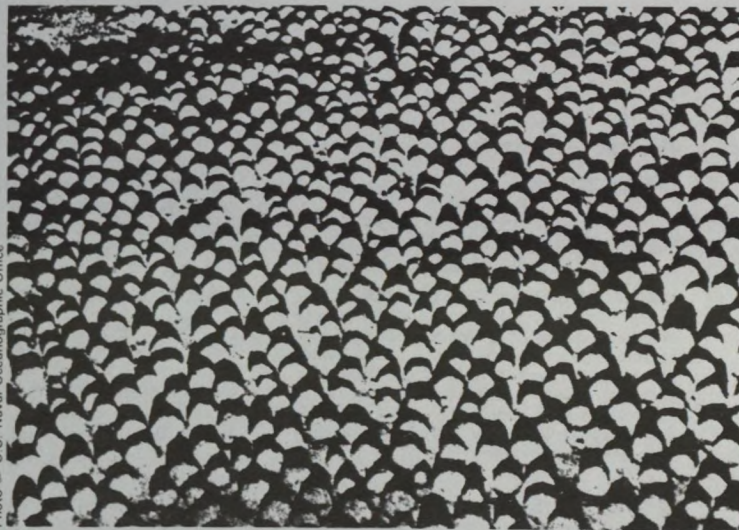


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SIX MILLION TONS OF MINERALS A YEAR

Vast areas of the ocean are strewn with nodules like those shown above, containing minerals such as manganese, iron, copper and nickel. As much as 6 million tons of nodules may accumulate annually in this way in the Pacific Ocean alone. To exploit the world's several billion tons of ocean bed nodules with their mineral wealth new techniques are currently being developed. Left, scientists examine samples of ocean sediments. Nodules can be seen embedded on a "core" raised from the sea bed at a depth of 4,000 m. in the Madagascar Basin (Indian Ocean) during a French oceanographic expedition in May 1976.