

Marine Protected Areas: Tools for a Healthy Ocean



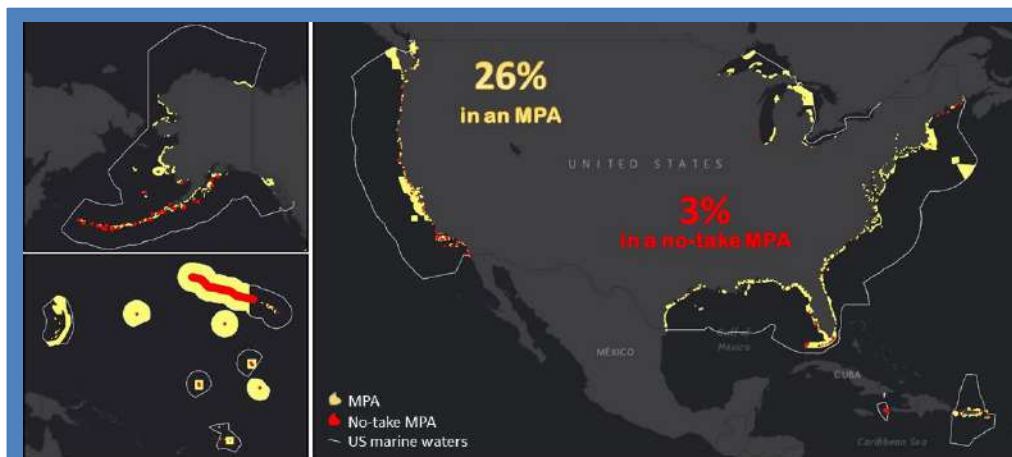
The nation's hub for building innovative partnerships and tools to protect the ocean's most important places.

An Urgent Need to Protect a Changing Ocean

Our ocean and its rich diversity of life are threatened by climate change and other human impacts at global, national, and local scales. These changes threaten the ocean's ability to sustain coastal communities and economies. Marine protected areas are a key strategy for sustaining and restoring ocean ecosystems. Based on scientific guidance, nearly every country in the world, including the United States, agreed to a goal of protecting at least 10% of the globe's coastal and marine areas by 2020. Scientists now conclude that 10% protection is not sufficient to protect the critical benefits that a healthy ocean provides, and are calling for the protection of at least 30% of the ocean by 2030.

Defining MPAs

Similar to parks and protected areas on land, "marine protected



In 2020, 26% of US waters are protected by MPAs, and 3% of US waters are covered by fully protected MPAs that prohibit extractive uses.

area (MPA)" is a broad term for a place in our ocean, estuaries, or Great Lakes where human activities are managed to protect important natural or cultural resources. Familiar examples of MPAs in US waters include national marine sanctuaries, national marine monuments, national wildlife refuges, national parks, national estuarine research reserves, and state and territorial counterparts to these programs.

MPAs are used all over the world to protect and restore marine life and the benefits it provides.

NOAA recognizes the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) definition of a protected area as "a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values."

MPA Benefits

By maintaining vibrant and healthy ecosystems, MPAs support coastal communities and economies through opportunities for recreation and tourism, research, and education. Most MPAs in the US also allow fishing. Areas of cultural

About Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

- Our ocean and the benefits it provides are threatened by climate change and other human impacts at global, national and local scales.
- MPAs help sustain ocean health and the many social and economic uses that depend on it.
- MPAs are designated to conserve important places in our oceans and Great Lakes.
- Ecological MPA networks strengthen protection and resilience.
- MPAs vary in their level of legal protection.
- MPAs are a key part of the solution to climate change impacts.

and historic significance, such as those of importance to tribal and indigenous peoples, archeological sites, and shipwrecks are often included in MPAs. Using MPAs to protect natural and cultural resources ensures the benefits and services they provide are available for future generations to enjoy.

MPA Networks

An MPA network is a connected group of MPAs that operate cooperatively to fulfill biodiversity goals and objectives more effectively than an individual site.

Ecological Networks

Integrating ecological connectivity and representativeness into the design and management of MPA networks can enhance conservation outcomes. Adaptive design of MPA networks can provide corridors for shifting species and habitats, and promotes resilience to climate change and other impacts.

Networks of MPA Managers

Partnerships and networks of MPA practitioners help individual MPA managers and staff become more effective. These networks create a community of practice where MPA practitioners can address common issues and challenges by sharing information and best practices. One such network is the North American Marine Protected Areas Network (NAMPAN) which brings together MPA practitioners from Canada, the United States, and Mexico to advance conservation goals.

Addressing Climate Change

MPAs and MPA networks are increasingly recognized as a key

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Photo: Chad King/NOAA

California's Statewide MPA

Network: In 2012, California created the first statewide network of MPAs in the US. Over 120 MPAs cover 16% of state waters and safeguard a variety of connected habitats and species, like the kelp forest pictured here. The network consists of areas that have various levels of protection and includes some reserves that prohibit all extractive uses such as fishing.

tool for maintaining and restoring ecosystem resilience in a changing climate. Due to their place-based focus, long-term data sets, and controlled activities, MPAs are able to serve as "sentinel sites" for monitoring change of all types. MPAs can foster resilient, healthy marine ecosystems that are better able to withstand climate change impacts by reducing non-climate stressors on the environment, providing long-term protection to at-risk coastal and marine resources, reducing risk in the face of uncertainty, and engaging the public on climate-informed solutions.

Levels of Protection

Not all MPAs are created equal. Fully protected MPAs, also called "no take" or marine reserves, typically allow human access, but prohibit extraction or significant destruction of natural and cultural resources. Highly protected areas have been shown to produce stronger conservation outcomes than areas where more extractive uses are allowed. Multiple-use MPAs allow a range of activities, such as fishing, diving, and boating. Many MPAs have established

specific zones within their boundaries to limit specific uses to compatible places or times. NOAA's Marine Protected Areas Inventory classifies MPAs by level of protection, as well as by the IUCN protected area classification categories. A new tool, the MPA Guide, classifies MPAs by stage of establishment and level of protection to explain how these are tied to conservation outcomes.

Exploring MPA Information

[NOAA's MPA Inventory](#) is the national authoritative source for information on MPAs in US waters and is the official database used by the US for reporting toward global marine conservation targets.

The Inventory is a comprehensive geospatial database that combines publicly available data from state and federal MPA programs to assess MPA coverage and explore the status and trends of MPAs. The Inventory allows users to [visualize MPA boundaries](#) and [access geospatial information](#) on all US MPAs, including location, management agency, level of protection, links to the site website, and other fields.



Photo: Matthew Lawrence/NOAA

American lobster at Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary.



Photo: Ropate Delana/NOAA

People stand up paddle boarding at the National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa.