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NEW STUDY: MORE AND BETTER U.S. MARINE PROTECTED AREAS NEEDED TO PROTECT KEY ECOSYSTEMS

MAY 18, 2022, CORVALLIS, OREGON—A sweeping new analysis of US Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) published today in *Frontiers in Marine Science*, co-authored by scientists from 22 institutions across 14 states, identified significant gaps in the country’s ocean protections—leaving critical marine systems and the coastal economies that depend on them vulnerable to unprecedented ecological pressures and posing a challenge to meeting conservation goals laid out in the Biden Administration’s [“America the Beautiful”](#) initiative.

The paper, [“A Scientific Synthesis of Marine Protected Areas in the United States: Status and Recommendations”](#), used the groundbreaking new science-based framework [“The MPA Guide”](#) to evaluate the country’s 50 largest MPAs—which make up 99.7% of US MPA area. Researchers found that over 96 percent of the total MPA area—and 99 percent of US MPA area that is fully or highly protected from extractive and destructive human activities—is located in the central Pacific Ocean. The MPA coverage in other US regions is surprisingly sparse. Just 1.9% of the U.S. waters outside the central Pacific benefit from any MPA protections and most of those are categorized as only lightly or minimally protected. This means that about 98% of waters around the continental US are not protected by any kind of MPA.

“These findings highlight an urgent need to improve the quality, quantity, and representativeness of MPA protection across U.S. waters to bring benefits to human and marine communities,” said Dr. Jenna Sullivan-Stack, a research associate at Oregon State University and lead author on the paper.

“It is important to recognize that well-managed MPAs, designed with the local context in mind, can deliver benefits that extend beyond marine life to coastal communities that depend on sustainable marine resources for their livelihoods and cultural survival,” said Dr. Ana Spalding, Associate Professor of Marine and Coastal Policy at Oregon State University and Research Associate at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institution.

Drawing on the work of dozens of scientists, the analysis of US MPAs represents the first systematic application of *The MPA Guide* to assess the quantity *and* quality of the country’s marine protections. The *Guide* uses a variety of criteria based on decades of research in

ecosystems around the world to rate areas as fully, highly, lightly, or minimally protected—crucial information as policymakers seek to measure and improve the level of protection currently offered by existing MPAs and develop new and effective MPAs. It also highlights the need to improve equity and other social and ecological conditions for effectiveness.

“Coordinated action is needed to make the most of US MPAs, both to create more of the right kinds in the places that need them, and to ensure that established MPAs are effective, equitable, and climate-resilient. Only then can US ocean conservation achieve the goals laid out in the America the Beautiful initiative,” added Dr. Sullivan-Stack.

Based on an analysis of the findings, the paper makes specific recommendations for US decision-makers going forward, as they work to implement the country’s “30x30” goal to conserve at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. Some of these recommendations include:

1. **Establish more, and more effective, MPAs.** The US needs to create more fully and highly protected MPAs to reach national conservation goals, especially in continental waters. Current MPAs with weak protection need re-evaluating, and all MPAs need to be actively managed to optimize results.
2. **Establish new, highly and fully protected, networked MPAs with better representation of US marine biodiversity, regions and habitats.** The vast Central Pacific MPAs are valuable and should be celebrated and strengthened, including with plans for management. But the US needs to create effective MPAs and networks in other areas too, to reflect the diversity of its marine ecosystems. This will bring biodiversity protection and the social benefits of MPAs within reach of many more communities.
3. **Improve attention and commitment to equity in new and existing MPAs.** Close engagement with diverse rights-holders and stakeholders in inclusive planning and management processes – particularly with Indigenous and other historically excluded communities – increases MPA equity, utility, and effectiveness.
4. **Track MPAs by level of protection, not only by total area covered.** Doing this is the best way to understand if MPAs will deliver the desired outcomes. Frameworks like *The MPA Guide* help identify the activities allowed and clarify the level of protection offered, to help observers understand whether positive outcomes related to biodiversity and climate resilience can be expected. Outcomes from sites that provide effective and lasting conservation benefits but are not MPAs, like military closed areas for example, should also be tracked as the US works to achieve its 30x30 target.
5. **Ensure that MPAs are durable and climate-ready so they will continue to work in the future.** Governance structures and long-term capacity – including funding support for staffing, monitoring etc – should be established and strengthened. More research is needed on how to make sure MPAs are both ‘climate-ready’ and also can help mitigate the effects of climate change.
6. **Build on existing state MPA initiatives and encourage and coordinate MPA actions at the state level and between state and federal waters.** State support will be needed to achieve the federal goals of America the Beautiful. Initiatives could include executive

and legislative actions, outreach and education, and stakeholder coordination. Some states have already passed resolutions relating to 30x30.

The full paper and access to supporting materials are [available here](#).

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