Marine Protected Areas in the United States
What they are, why they matter, and how to maximize their effectiveness

As the climate and biodiversity crises grow, and recognizing the importance of healthy ecosystems and natural resources for the wellbeing of all people, the United States has committed to conserving at least 30% of its waters by 2030. Well-designed and managed marine protected areas (MPAs) have a central role to play in reaching this target. Today 26% of the US ocean is protected in some form of MPA.

But while the primary goal of all MPAs is the long-term conservation of nature, their characteristics and effectiveness vary a great deal – simply knowing the overall area they cover tells us very little.

That's why a group of researchers used a *science*-based framework – *The MPA Guide*[1] – to produce the most complete and up-to-date assessment of US MPAs[2]. Their findings reveal an urgent need to improve the quality, quantity, representativeness, and equity of US ocean protections.

KEY FINDINGS

More, and more effective, US MPAs are needed to achieve climate, biodiversity, and social justice goals

Researchers used *The MPA Guide* to evaluate the current status of ocean protection in the 50 largest US MPAs, which account for 99.7% of the total MPA area in the US. They found the following.

26%
Overall

of US waters are in some type of MPA; the vast majority of that area is highly or fully protected. Although this is close to the 30% target, almost all US MPA area, including fully and highly protected area, is in vast areas of the central Pacific.

Only the central Pacific region is close to achieving a 30% MPA coverage target. MPA coverage in all other regions is extremely sparse, and the level of protection varies considerably. For example, in the northeast, 4.7% is protected, and two-thirds of this is highly protected. In the northwest, 4.2% is protected but most has only a minimal level of protection. The mid-Atlantic has a mere 0.3% protected in any kind of MPA.

1.9%
Continental

More than 98% of waters around the continental US have no protection in any kind of MPA, and the 1.9% that do are largely either "lightly" or "minimally" protected from extractive or otherwise damaging human activity.

Effective and equitable ocean protection means local and regional benefits for biodiversity, climate, and social justice. Increasing the quantity, quality, and representativeness of US MPAs, especially in underrepresented regions, will allow these benefits to be realized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Coordinated action is needed to make the most of US MPAs...

...both to create more of the right kinds of MPAs in the places that need them, and to ensure that established MPAs are effective, equitable, and climate-ready.
The following specific recommendations emerged from this scientific analysis of US MPAs.

Establish more, and more effective, MPAs.

Ensure MPAs are durable so they will continue to work in the future.

Improve attention and commitment to equity in new and existing MPAs.

Establish new highly and fully protected, networked MPAs, especially in underrepresented geographic regions and habitats.

Build on existing State MPA initiatives and encourage and coordinate federal and state MPA actions.

Strengthen the NOAA MPA Center with long-term funding to support US MPA design, stewardship, and effectiveness.

Track and report progress towards both a single coverage target and by level of protection, because MPAs' ability to deliver desired outcomes is based on level of protection.

Reinstate and empower the MPA Federal Advisory Committee (MPA FAC) to ensure ongoing science and stakeholder engagement and advice.

Revisit and update the US National Ocean Policy (NOP) and Ocean Policy Committee for an integrated, whole-government approach to ocean planning and management.

1. Grorud-Colvert, K., J. Sullivan-Stack, C. M. Roberts, V. Constant, B. Horta e Costa, E. P. Pike, N. Kingston, D. Laffoley, E. Sala, J. Claudet, A. M. Friedlander, D. A. Gill, S. E. Lester, J. C. Day, E. J. Gonçalves, G. N. Ahmadia, M. Rand, A. Villagomez, N. C. Ban, G. G. Gurney, A. Spalding, N. J. Bennett, J. Briggs, L. E. Morgan, R. A. Moffitt, M. Deguignet, E. Pikitch, E. S. Darling, S. Jessen, S. Hameed, G. Di Carlo, P. Guidetti, J. Harris, J. Torge, Z. Kazilkaya, T. Agardy, P. M. Cury, N. Shah, K. Sack, L. Cao, M. Fernandez, and J. Lubchenco. 2021. The MPA Guide: A framework to achieve global goals for the ocean. *Science*. eabf086. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abf0861

2. J. Sullivan-Stack, O. Aburto-Oropeza, C.M. Brooks, R.B. Cabral, J.E. Caselle, F. Chan, J.E. Duffy, D.C. Dunn, A.M. Friedlander, H.K. Fulton-Bennett, S.D. Gaines, L.R. Gerber, E. Hines, H.M. Leslie, S.E. Lester, J.M.C. MacCarthy, S.M. Maxwell, J. Mayorga, D. McCauley, F. Micheli, R. Moffitt, K.J. Nickols, S.R. Palumbi, D.R. Pearsall, E.P. Pike, E.K. Pikitch, G. Sancho, A.K. Spalding, D.O. Suman, S.T. Sykora-Bodie, and K. Grorud-Colvert. 2022. A Scientific Synthesis of Marine Protected Areas in the United States: Status and Recommendations. *Frontiers in Marine Science*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2022.849927