

MPA NEWS



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The 30% no-take target of the World Parks Congress: Why it is both problematic and useful

In our previous issue, MPA News reported on the outcomes of the World Parks Congress, held in Sydney, Australia, in November 2014 ([MPA News 16:2](#)). Convened once a decade, the WPC sets priorities for the next ten years of protected area practice. The central output of November's meeting was The Promise of Sydney: this document compiles recommendations from multiple "themes" and "streams" of delegates at the meeting, grouped by subject matter (www.worldparkscongress.org/about/promise_of_sydney.html).

The WPC's Marine Theme was led by four institutions: the World Commission on Protected Areas - Marine, the (US) National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and Australia's Department of the Environment. This theme provided its own set of recommendations (<http://worldparkscongress.org/downloads/approaches/ThemeM.pdf>), which the theme's organizers had developed with community input leading up to and through the Congress.

The primary recommendation from participants in the Marine Theme featured a percentage-based target for no-take areas:

"Recommendation 1. Urgently increase the ocean area that is effectively and equitably managed in ecologically representative and well-connected systems of MPAs or other effective conservation measures. This network should target protection of both biodiversity and ecosystem services and should include at least 30% of each marine habitat. **The ultimate aim is to create a fully sustainable ocean, at least 30% of which has no extractive activities.**" [emphasis added]

However, as pointed out by a reader of MPA News (<http://openchannels.org/node/8515> - scroll down for his comment), this percentage-based target could be seen as conflicting with recommendations from another group of delegates at the WPC: namely Stream 1, which focused on Reaching Conservation Goals (<http://worldparkscongress.org/downloads/approaches/Stream1.pdf>). In its recommendations, Stream 1 did not call for a specific percentage-based target. In fact, it called such targets "problematic":

"Recommendation 20: Governments and peoples must move far beyond the Aichi targets to adaptive conservation systems that are based on halting biodiversity loss.... This must be done balancing biodiversity and human needs. We need to increase conservation until biodiversity loss is halted. The total area of protected areas and connectivity lands needs to be far higher than current conceptions and delegates agreed on the importance of setting ambitious targets. **Percentage targets are problematic in focusing on area at the expense of biodiversity objectives.** Nonetheless, many delegates argued that these should be around 30% of the planet for no-take reserves, 50% overall protection, and 100% of the land and water managed sustainably." [emphasis added]

So does this mean there is a conflict between Stream 1 and the Marine Theme on a percentage-based target? If so, whose recommendation should take priority, and what does this all mean going forward for the MPA field?

Increasing protection until the loss of biodiversity stops

As anyone who has observed the crafting of recommendations at large international meetings can attest, things can move quite quickly between drafts, with language changing - sometimes significantly - over the course of a few hours. In the case of the WPC, leaders of the themes and streams had an opportunity to preview early drafts of recommendations from their peers ahead of the meeting. Once the WPC began, though, it became more difficult to follow what was going on in each group.

"At the Congress, things were moving very quickly and it wasn't possible to track everything that was happening at once," said Lauren Wenzel, acting director of NOAA's National MPA Center, in an 8 January 2015 webinar "Keeping the Promise of Sydney" (<https://www.openchannels.org/node/8559>). "So we did have somewhat different philosophical approaches to some of these discussions. I think the marine community felt it was important to honor the commitments that were made in Durban [at the 2003 WPC, where marine delegates called for between 20-30% of the world's oceans to be placed in no-take areas] and to try to move the ball forward. Spatial targets were a good way of doing that."

Hugh Possingham of the University of Queensland, who co-developed the conservation planning software Marxan, was instrumental in the drafting of recommendations from Stream 1. Although he had no official role in the Stream's drafting process, the ideas he delivered to the Stream's delegates in a talk on the second-to-last day are directly embodied in many of the recommendations.

"Spatial targets are misleading," says Possingham. "How much does nature need in terms of protected areas? The only real answer we have right now is 'more', because what we have now is demonstrably insufficient to stem the loss of biodiversity."

According to Possingham, a better approach than percentage targets would be an adaptive one: keep increasing the amount of area that is protected - and its representation - until biodiversity losses fall to background rates, at which point we can stop. Conceivably, this might mean protected percentages of significantly higher than 30%. In fact, Possingham views 30% no-take coverage as the "bare minimum" for sustainable marine ecosystems and fisheries, based on various studies (like <http://palumbi.stanford.edu/manuscripts/Gerber%20et%20al%202003.pdf>).

Although that minimum is not communicated in the stream's Recommendation 20, the phrase "[t]he total area of protected areas and connectivity lands needs to be far higher than current conceptions" refers to Possingham's concept. Incidentally, a near-final draft of Stream 1's recommendations called for a 30% target for no-take MPA coverage; that call was removed in the final version.

Balancing aspirational and operational goals

IUCN, which produces the WPC meetings, is managing a process now to harmonize the recommendations of the various themes and streams from Sydney. This will include addressing the MPA percentage target question. Meetings among theme/stream leaders will occur in coming months.

Asked whether he feels the Marine Theme recommendations or the Stream 1 recommendations should take precedence, Possingham suggests taking the 30% target but adding a big caveat. "No specific percentage will secure biodiversity, and any target between 30% and 100% would be a compromise reflecting different aspirations of users and stakeholders," he says. He notes that setting high targets can be discouraging - for resource users (because they feel their activities are threatened) and for conservationists (because they feel the targets may be impossible to reach). "This is as much about the management of aspirations and hopes as it is about the science," says Possingham.

Management of aspirations may also be a factor in discussions on the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, under which Aichi Target 11 (binding on signatory governments) calls for just 10% of marine areas to be conserved by 2020, with no mention of no-take coverage. That target greatly lags the (non-binding) recommendations from Sydney. Dan Laffoley, WCPA - Marine chair, says the Sydney target could be useful for directing the forthcoming CBD conversations.

"What happens after 2020?" says Laffoley. "I think we need to put in place a new vision for what countries should do with regard to MPAs. Sitting where we are, knowing what we know about the multiple stresses facing the marine environment and the directions of a lot of ecosystem indicators, we need to apply a much more ambitious vision for MPA coverage, and very soon." Notably, current no-take coverage still amounts to less than 1% of the world ocean.

Laffoley also notes that the outcomes of the WPC are not all about percentage targets. "We need to bear in mind that there are a couple aspects to this," he says. "One is the aspirational material, the targets,

that we talk a lot about at congresses like the WPC. There's also the operational side - the practical steps of making MPAs effective." The Marine Theme recommendations from Sydney include calls for applying new surveillance tools, supporting collaborative learning between fisheries and MPA managers, managing sites for human as well as ecological benefits, and developing innovative partnerships, including for creative financing of sites.

Leading up to the next World Conservation Congress (in Hawaii in 2016) and the next International MPA Congress (Chile in 2017), the Marine Theme organizers will be developing plans and projects to help support these site-level goals. Says Wenzel, "We're going to be focusing on the practical steps of making these things happen, and not just on a number."

For more information:

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BOX: More MPA News coverage of percentage targets for MPAs

Over the years, MPA News has published several articles on percentage-based targets, including voices in favor of broader-scale management for the whole ocean or in favor of not setting percentage targets at all. Our range of coverage includes:

- "New calculation of world MPA coverage is twice previous estimates, but still far below target" [MPA News 14:1](#)
- "The MPA math: How to reach the 10% target for global MPA coverage" [MPA News 13:5](#)
- "How close is the MPA field to meeting its targets?" [MPA News 12:1](#)
- "Global targets for MPA designations will not be met; experts respond" [MPA News 7:5](#)
- "Perspective: Dangerous targets and inflexible stances threaten marine conservation efforts" [MPA News 3:11](#)

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