

# MPA NEWS



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## The big question for the MPA field: How effective are our MPAs? An interview with Jean-Luc Solandt

As the global MPA community approaches the 2020 deadline for meeting [Aichi Target 11](#), it must achieve two potentially very different goals. There is the *numerical* goal of covering 10% of coastal and marine areas in MPAs. And there is the *qualitative* goal that the conservation be achieved through “effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems” of protected areas.

Achieving the numerical goal will be easier than the rest.

Take the UK, for instance. By the end of 2018, the nation had 297 MPAs that covered 23% of its marine estate (not including the UK’s vast Overseas Territories like Chagos or the Pitcairn Islands). That 23% figure looks impressive compared to the Aichi Target’s 10%. Yet the UK has only four MPAs that are completely no-take. And just 1.6% of the nation’s marine area is closed to bottom trawling.

So are the UK’s MPAs *effectively managed*? As reported in *MPA News*, [recent research suggests](#) that “weakly regulated” MPAs – i.e., sites that allow high-impact gear types like bottom trawling – yield few if any direct conservation benefits, due to the impact of their allowed uses. In other words, such sites are generally ineffective for biodiversity protection.

With the 2020 deadline approaching, it seems likely that we will see a lot of analyses of national MPA systems – as governments race to meet the numerical goal of Aichi Target 11, and as academics and NGOs simultaneously assess the qualitative goal.

Among the first of these reality checks was by Jean-Luc Solandt, [published in \*Biodiversity\* journal last year](#) on England’s MPA system. Solandt, of the Marine Conservation Society in the UK, says his nation is falling well short of the protection needed to meet the international target. *MPA News* spoke with him.

**MPA News:** You write that although some habitats have been protected as part of England’s MPA network, the system as a whole is not truly effective for providing ecosystem-based management. And this is partly due to the uses that continue to be allowed in most of the MPAs, like bottom trawling.

**Jean-Luc Solandt:** Correct. This is why we published the [MPA Reality Check](#) website, which provides insights on how fully England is protecting and managing its marine environment.

**MPA News:** As the 2020 deadline approaches for Aichi Target 11, other countries might implement MPA systems that similarly meet the 10% numerical goal but arguably fall short of the effectiveness requirements. What advice do you have for MPA planners in other nations on how to avoid the situation in which the UK finds itself?

**Solandt:** My advice to planners is that designating MPAs without including a pre-ordained zoned management plan is easy but ineffectual. For example, [the zoning of the Great Barrier Reef](#) in Australia and [California’s MLPA process](#) were better examples of how to designate MPAs with teeth: i.e., agree on the management during the discourse about designation, not after the site has been designated. Front-loading the agreement gives clarity on what MPAs should be for from the outset – the recovery and protection of particular habitats.

**MPA News:** You point out in your paper that England’s current MPAs do include a broad and representative selection of habitats, but they generally only protect the vulnerable “remnant” parts – where damage is not yet apparent – while most of the rest is left to be trawled or otherwise exploited.

**Solandt:** Yes. Strengthening the non-remnant parts of UK MPAs needs to be more of a priority. There was a [wonderfully effective campaign](#) by Save Scottish Seas (a campaign consortium of Scottish Wildlife NGOs) called “Don’t take the ‘P’ out of MPAs”, which [emphasized the benefits](#) of protecting all parts of MPAs, not just the remnant portions. This brilliant campaign received over 5000 supportive statements from the public when Scottish Government was consulting on setting protection measures for entire suites of habitats surrounding specific vulnerable features. It ended up in ‘whole-sites’ being protected. This is now a management approach of interest to England’s authorities (Scotland has been moving to such an approach since 2015).

**MPA News:** Have you encountered anyone who uses the large UK Overseas Territory MPAs as an argument for why MPAs in domestic UK waters don’t need to be so strongly regulated – i.e., because the large territorial MPAs already take care of that?

**Solandt:** That would be a nonsensical argument. Compared to domestic UK waters, Overseas Territories are much less affected by bottom trawls over large areas or general overfishing of natural trophic levels. Therefore the overseas sites are at a starting point of needing protection from future exploitation. In contrast, domestic UK waters need recovery from 130+ years of bottom trawling, ports, poor water quality, estuary development, habitat loss, and so forth. So the requirements of marine conservation are markedly different in the Overseas Territories compared to domestic waters.

**MPA News:** The current Brexit situation – in which the UK is expected to exit the European Union this year – seems to be somewhat of a mess, with British Parliament having trouble agreeing on a route to leaving the EU. You have written previously on [how Brexit could impact UK MPAs](#). With the negotiations up in the air right now, do you have anything to add on this?

**Solandt:** If the UK does leave the EU, I don’t trust that the negotiations between our current national government and the EU to enable that exit will support effective MPAs in offshore UK waters. Granted, whilst we remain in the EU, MPA management in these waters is negotiated through failed EU processes that have contributed to the UK’s currently ineffective MPA system. **[Editor’s note:** See the box, below, “A quick guide to the complications of UK marine jurisdiction” for an explanation of the EU processes.] But if/when we leave the EU, MPA management will effectively be traded off against markets for fish with EU states. That could leave MPAs at the bottom of priorities, and you could see sites de-designated or re-designated (with even less-protective management plans). That being said, things can’t be that much worse than the current insipid approach to ocean recovery that we have. We still have only four no-take MPAs measuring about 21 km<sup>2</sup> in total, and just 1.6% of our seas is closed to bottom trawls. This is after years of advocacy and support.

**For more information:**

Jean-Luc Solandt, Marine Conservation Society, UK. Email: [Jean-Luc.Solandt@mcsuk.org](mailto:Jean-Luc.Solandt@mcsuk.org)

### Box: A quick guide to the complications of UK marine jurisdiction

**0-12 nm from shore:** These are the territorial waters for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Combined, these four countries make up the UK.

**0-6 nm from shore:** In these inshore territorial waters, management of MPAs and fisheries is the responsibility of the adjacent country, whether England, Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. There is no fishing by other EU member states in these waters.

**6-12 nm from shore:** In some parts of these outer territorial waters, there are historical fishing rights for *some* other EU member states. This can lead to complications over getting fishing bans in place as other member states can have their say.

**12-200 nm from shore:** These are the UK’s offshore waters. Any MPA in these waters designated by any of the four countries of the UK must have any fishing regulations (to support MPA conservation objectives) signed off by the EU Commission. “This is highly politicized,” says Jean-Luc Solandt, “and has so far failed because of the ability of any fishing-interest state to essentially veto/delay/block any plan because of national commercial fishing interest. Not one square kilometer of fishing ban has happened in the past 10 years in any offshore UK MPA because of this. Indeed, in order to get measures through this multi-member state process, it’s likely that management will be watered down so much that it becomes meaningless.”

**UK Overseas Territories:** The UK has exclusive rights to manage the 200-nm EEZ around its Overseas Territories. This makes both designation and management of MPAs in these waters much easier. The decision-making is up to the UK Foreign Office and local Overseas Territory administrations, with input from other UK governmental, academic, and NGO institutions. "This is why there is a great deal of 'win' happening in the UK Overseas Territories marine environment," says Solandt, referring to the designation of large, strongly protected MPAs in the Chagos Archipelago, Pitcairn Islands, and elsewhere. "In contrast, to get any fisheries management in offshore MPAs for domestic UK seas from 12-200 nm, you need a hell of a lot of good lawyers, long-term campaigning, energy, tolerance, and language skills – and a free diary for 10+ years."

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