

MPA NEWS



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IUCN moves to help countries apply marine protection: By clarifying its standards, global body hopes to inspire more ocean safeguards

Editor's note: The 2020 deadline looms for achieving 10% global MPA coverage – the goal under both [Aichi Target 11](#) of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN's [SDG target 14.5](#). As the 2020 deadline gets closer, the consideration of what counts as an MPA is gaining greater importance. Whether the world meets the 10% target may depend on it.

To provide guidance on what is an MPA, IUCN [released a set of consolidated standards in June 2018](#). The following article is a reprint of [one published in June](#) with insights on the IUCN standards from Mike Wong, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas vice chair for the North American region. The article has been edited lightly by MPA News for style and length.

By **Angelo O'Connor Villagomez**, **Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project senior officer**

As more countries designate MPAs in their territories, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which for over 70 years has been the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to conserve it, has recently provided clarity to help countries more accurately report their MPAs to the [World Database on Protected Areas \(WDPA\)](#).

With more accuracy, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and other stakeholders can properly track progress toward global targets, such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's Aichi Target 11, which calls for protecting 10% of the ocean by 2020, and the IUCN recommendation of safeguarding at least 30% of the ocean by 2030.

To learn more about the IUCN MPA standards, I caught up with Mike Wong, the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas' vice chair for the North American region.

Question: How does IUCN define an MPA?

Mike Wong: In place for over a decade now, the IUCN definition for a protected area is "a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values." This states that the primary goal of any protected area, including MPAs, must be conservation of biodiversity. In practice, however, the term MPA is being used to describe many forms of management applied to a defined marine area, ranging from no-take areas to those that permit industrial levels of extractive activities. Only those marine areas that have a primary conservation objective should be described as MPAs.

How much of the ocean is protected?

Wong: Interesting question. According to UN Environment's [World Database on Protected Areas](#), MPAs cover 7.26% of the ocean as of May 2018. That's based on the best data we have, which is submitted by governments. Just collecting all the data is a monumental task, as there are over 15,000 MPAs designated around the world. Yet, recent reviews, including a 2018 peer-reviewed study [published in *Marine Policy*](#), have found that areas that may not meet the IUCN standard of an MPA are also included in the database.

Using a slightly different method of gathering data, the [Marine Conservation Institute's Atlas of Marine Protection](#) also estimates how much of the ocean is actively protected. The institute uses WDPA data as a starting point but compares it to national databases and other sources of regional, national, and local information to determine if areas are truly protected. The atlas estimates that about 3.7% of the ocean is actively protected as of May 2018.

How is IUCN working to address that discrepancy?

Wong: This discrepancy is not new, and there has been much discussion in the conservation community on what should actually count as protected. This is similar to the "paper park" discussions for terrestrial protected areas. To begin addressing the issue, IUCN organized a workshop of experts and managers in Washington, DC, in January 2018 to discuss how the classification system for MPAs can better ensure that areas designated and reported as MPAs are truly effective measures for marine protection.

These clarifications should help to inform decision-makers, scientists, and communities in the planning and establishment of new MPAs, which will have a stated conservation purpose. They will also help to guide continuous improvement of previously established areas that fall short of agreed global standards. [Editor's note: View the global MPA standards from IUCN [here](#).]

What were the outcomes of the workshop?

Wong: We know that well-designed and effectively managed MPAs conserve marine biodiversity and provide social, economic, and cultural benefits. The consensus outcome from the workshop was the need to publish a short document that makes clear what activities can and cannot take place in an MPA. The document does not propose new standards but emphasizes applying global standards that have already been agreed upon. The document also encourages governments to ensure that their MPA designations and reporting meet these standards of protection.

The workshop reaffirmed that the primary purpose of an MPA must be the conservation of biodiversity and that industrial activities are not compatible with MPAs. Our workshop also highlighted that at the 2016 World Conservation Congress in Hawaii, IUCN members [recommended](#) "a network of highly protected MPAs ... creating a fully sustainable ocean, at least 30 percent of which has no extractive activities" for the future.

Through an elaborate consultation process, IUCN shared the draft document with members in February 2018 and accepted comments through April 2018. We received a lot of engagement from governments and stakeholders from around the world and have put together a document that helps clarify the difference between an MPA and areas designated for other uses, such as fisheries management.

So is this a new definition of an MPA?

Wong: No, this is not a new definition. The standards document was written using existing agreed-upon resolutions, recommendations, and [guidance from the IUCN](#). What we did was to compile previously agreed criteria for what comprises a marine protected area in a single document — something that had not previously been done — and eliminate any doubt as to the kinds of activities allowed within a designated marine protected area.

We simply want to provide clarity to help countries report more accurately to the WDPA so that we can properly track progress of how much of the ocean is actually protected. The onus is ultimately on the countries themselves to follow, set, and meet these standards in their marine protection planning. But the IUCN will continue to work with its member states to help them adhere to and integrate these standards in their new MPAs, as well as to advise them on how they can improve upon existing MPAs that do not meet the standards.

How do you expect countries to apply the standards?

Wong: The goal here is to facilitate continuous improvement. The broad application of the term MPA has resulted in some countries reporting MPAs that do not meet the global standards. These areas may provide little to no conservation benefits right now, but it does not mean we throw up our hands and give up. Conservation is a perpetual process and by recognizing the need to change our approach we can make real progress for the future. We have seen such advancements in terrestrial protected areas under the [IUCN Green List](#) program. We know that by clarifying what qualifies as an MPA, we can help countries work towards creating real protected areas and meeting the qualitative as well as the quantitative elements of Aichi Target 11. By taking these actions, our next generation will be able to witness improvements in the health of our oceans and reversals in the downward trend of marine biodiversity.

For further reading

MPA website of the World Database on Protected Areas. [Click here](#)

Atlas of Marine Protection, produced by Marine Conservation Institute. [Click here](#)

Sala, E. et al. "Assessing real progress towards effective ocean protection." Marine Policy, May 2018 [Click here](#)

"Is Canada taking shortcuts to meet its marine protection targets?" Hakai Magazine, July 2018. [Click here](#)

Costello, M. "Marine nature conservation must focus on fully-protected reserves, not resource management." Blog post, July 2018. [Click here](#)

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