

# MPA NEWS



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## Letter to the Editor: MPA community continues to reinvent tools rather than seek consistency

### Dear MPA News:

I read with interest your most recent edition ([MPA News 14:1](#)). What was particularly interesting to me was the juxtaposition of two of the articles. The first was the report of the work of the Marine Reserves Coalition on the new calculations of the coverage of MPAs worldwide, followed by the announcement of the new [MPAtlas.org](#) database by the Marine Conservation Institute. Taken together, these articles point to another example of how the MPA community has - instead of seeking consistency and building on foundations that have been provided to us - reverted yet again to reinventing these important tools.

The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) offers the opportunity for MPA systems from around the world to share their information in an accessible and transparent database. This database is, indeed, incomplete (as mentioned in the first article) and while updated as frequently as the limits of resources allow, does not serve effectively as the comprehensive source of MPA data it was designed to provide. However, instead of populating this database with new information, the community creates new ones.

The WDPA is constructed to encourage submissions of new data, and this is not a complicated or burdensome process. However, for some reason, we consistently redirect our collective efforts to creating other mechanisms that have varying and often conflicting criteria. While offering additional important information, these new tools do so at the expense of having a central clearinghouse of data from which global trends in MPA designation and management can be analyzed and evaluated. It is no wonder that our ability to determine something as fundamental as the global coverage of MPAs is so compromised that we cannot accurately determine what it really is.

While we can debate the value of the 10% target [i.e., that 10% of global oceans should be protected in MPAs by 2020], the fact is that the target does exist, and knowing more precisely where we are in reaching that goal is pretty important, for obvious reasons. The task at hand - achieving the 10% target - is a challenging one. The public constituencies of support needed for this cannot be effectively created when we announce that, "No, in fact we have double the area covered than previously calculated (but we're not really sure about this number either)." As scientists, we have a better grasp of uncertainty, and its implications, than the general public, and one has only to look at the debate over global climate change to see what not understanding "uncertainty" can lead to. It would be entirely understandable if the public (including the government decision-makers who fund and support MPA designation and management) might very well conclude, "Well, if they think it's double what they thought it was, how sure are we that we're not much closer to the target?" Even with a more comprehensive, centralized global database there will always be uncertainty, but at least with better data, progress toward the target can be calculated more robustly, and the uncertainty measured and explained.

Perhaps those responsible for the WDPA should undertake an evaluation of why the community does not believe this database is worthy of their time and efforts to achieve its full potential. Perhaps the global MPA community should take a hard look at itself to find out why we choose to reinvent rather than build upon these important foundations. Perhaps the MPA networks and systems around the world should think about revisiting the WDPA in terms of making certain the information it contains about their respective networks and systems is complete and accurate. I am not sanguine we will do any of these things. But something should be done to harmonize these sources of information, to better address our data needs and requirements with regard to the global status of MPAs.

Kudos to both the Marine Conservation Institute and the Marine Reserves Coalition for their hard work in helping to expand our knowledge of global MPA coverage - offering critical information not only to evaluate progress toward the target but, perhaps more importantly, helping to define how these sites are managed, and ultimately their contribution to effective marine conservation. However, it would have been better, in my view, to build on the foundation created by the WDPA than to create yet another global MPA database. If we are truly a community of practice, we should be able to agree on one tool and throw all our energies into making it the most useful one it can be.

Like my previous comment on MPA terminology ([MPA News 12:3](#)), we seem, as a community, to lack the capacity for embracing only one way of doing things that could offer greater clarity and utility, and that would make what we do more transparent and understandable. Unless we find this capacity to act as a community, we have only ourselves to blame for the slow pace of progress toward these goals to which we are all deeply committed.

The opinions expressed here are entirely my own, and do not reflect in any way the views or positions of any agency or organization with which I am affiliated.

### Brad Barr

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## Response #1 to Brad Barr

### Dear MPA News:

Thank you for the opportunity to reply to Brad Barr's thoughtful letter. He is correct in many ways about what needs to happen to improve MPA information, and we do agree with many of his thoughts. First, we gratefully acknowledge the support of the WDPA team in helping us develop the MPAtlas.org website, as we do indeed use their database. While we have developed a new website, we are not trying to reinvent that tool but expand it in new ways useful to the MPA community.

[MPAtlas.org](#) is working with [ProtectedPlanet.net](#) and the WDPA team to keep data synchronized between the two projects wherever possible. MPAtlas.org uses the WDPA as its base information, but has updated and incorporated new information from many other sources. We are working to make sure our new research and changes make their way back to the WDPA. This month the MPAtlas.org and ProtectedPlanet teams are finishing development of features on MPAtlas.org where user edits and contributions to information about MPA sites will be submitted directly to ProtectedPlanet. This insures that we're all working from the same core data and that any changes are immediately reflected by both online applications. To facilitate this data-sharing, MPAtlas.org has also updated its user authentication to automatically login existing ProtectedPlanet users.

Staying on top of changes to MPAs and calculations regarding national and international MPA targets is a huge effort. In fact this is the primary reason we are developing MPAtlas.org. First MPAtlas.org is an MPA-centric tool unlike ProtectedPlanet/WDPA, which include all protected areas on land or the water. Second, MPAtlas.org is striving to provide more features and analyses that pertain specifically to the MPA landscape, both for conservation in the water and politics in national and international arenas. The MPAtlas.org team is developing a basic MPA classification with its online maps and database that will show MPA coverage amounts in high (e.g., largely no-take), moderate, low, and unknown protection levels for major political and biogeographic areas. This should show a clearer picture of MPA coverage and distribution rather than a catch-all total coverage as presented by the Marine Reserves Coalition.

Finally, we wholeheartedly agree that we as a community need more engagement in getting more complete and accurate information on MPAs in all regions of the world ocean. We encourage MPA News readers to sign on as editors to MPAtlas.org and help us update information. We gratefully accept suggestions or help through our website or directly.

### Lance Morgan & Russell Moffitt

Lance Morgan is president ([Lance.Morgan@marine-conservation.org](mailto:Lance.Morgan@marine-conservation.org)) and Russell Moffitt is ocean conservation analyst ([Russell.Moffitt@marine-conservation.org](mailto:Russell.Moffitt@marine-conservation.org)) for the Marine Conservation Institute, US.

## Response #2 to Brad Barr

### Dear MPA News:

Thank you for the engaging debate and for the opportunity to contribute. IUCN and UNEP (WCMC) jointly enable the WDPA as the sole resource on protected areas that is mandated by the world's governments (it serves as the UN List of Protected Areas).

We are especially grateful for the support for the WDPA from Brad Barr of NOAA. We note that although the WDPA is far from perfect, over the last seven years we have managed to raise around US

\$400k per annum to continually improve the information and the ease with which it is made available - and it is good to receive recognition for our efforts!

Brad makes salient points regarding the potential for duplication of, and competition with, the WDPA, and this seems especially acute amongst the marine community. In recent years we have seen [MPAGlobal.org](#), [ProtectPlanetOcean.org](#) and most recently, [MPAtlas.org](#), all seeking to address perceived shortcomings in the WDPA and the marine data it holds. Clearly there are problems with the offering we make in this regard. But we are quite aware of these, and we are very capable of addressing any shortcomings if the community can be marshalled to get behind us.

We are delighted to be working with the MPAtlas.org team, which has incorporated the marine elements of the WDPA into their site. They are helpful and collaborative, and their initiative should - as they point out - ultimately benefit the quality of the data in the WDPA. Still, it is hard not to wonder if their original investments couldn't have been more focused on building the WDPA's marine data and strengthening ProtectedPlanet.net, perhaps with a dedicated marine component, rather than building something completely new....

No database of protected areas will ever be complete or totally accurate because the global protected areas network is in constant flux. In many parts of the world the boundaries of individual areas are not adequately described. However, the solution is for the community to support IUCN and UNEP by encouraging data flows to the WDPA to fill the gaps they have identified. If we want to see improvements in the WDPA at a faster rate of uptake, we need a broader base of support and contributions from the conservation community.

In closing, we also need the conservation community to coalesce around agreed statistics on protected area coverage, such as those produced by IUCN and UNEP for UN Millennium Development Goal 7 and Aichi Target 11. If these are not as good as they should be, by all means let's work together to fix the problem. The creation of competing analyses has the potential, as Brad has pointed out, to create utter confusion among policy and decision makers as to what to do next.

We welcome official updates to the WDPA as seen on [www.protectedplanet.net](http://www.protectedplanet.net) . For more details, please contact us at [protectedareas@unep-wcmc.org](mailto:protectedareas@unep-wcmc.org) .

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