

# MPA NEWS



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## U.S. Releases Final Framework for National MPA System

The U.S. has released the framework for its national system of marine protected areas. The framework outlines key components of the national system, including:

- A set of overarching national system goals and priority conservation objectives;
- MPA eligibility criteria and other definitions;
- A science-based public process for identifying conservation gaps; and
- A process for improving regional, national, and international coordination.

At this time, the national system remains only a framework: although the U.S. has nearly 1800 designated MPAs throughout its waters, the national system does not yet officially contain any of these sites. First, MPA programs must nominate their eligible sites for formal inclusion in the system. Inclusion will be judged on a set of criteria, including that the site has a management plan and that it contributes to at least one priority conservation objective of the national system, as outlined in the framework. After a public comment period, sites judged to meet these criteria by the nominating agency and the U.S. National MPA Center will become part of the system.

The purpose of this nomination process is to focus on those MPAs that are most likely to contribute to the national system's long-term viability and effectiveness. Inclusion in the national system is expected to confer several benefits to eligible MPAs, including opportunities for enhanced site management capacity and increased coordination with other MPAs in the system. The nomination process for the first group of sites to be included in the system is open through 31 January 2009.

In addition to strengthening and coordinating existing MPAs, the national system aims to identify gaps in current protection and inform future MPA planning. Beginning in 2009 and progressing on a region-by-region basis, the MPA Center will conduct gap analyses with institutional partners and stakeholders. The first gap analysis will be conducted for the West Coast (the states of California, Oregon, and Washington from the shoreline to the outer edge of the EEZ) and will focus on mapping areas that contribute to the national system's objectives for natural heritage and sustainable production priority conservation. Critical cultural heritage areas will be identified through a separate process.

Once the gap analyses are completed, relevant resource management authorities will be responsible for deciding whether to designate new MPAs, says Lauren Wenzel of the National MPA Center. "The MPA Center does not have the authority to designate new MPAs," says Wenzel. "It will be up to other agencies, with input from regional stakeholders, to determine which authority best addresses the conservation objectives they have helped to identify for that area." If or when MPAs are designated through this process, she says, the designation could come at the federal, state, territorial, tribal, or local level. Those new sites would then be eligible for inclusion in the growing national system of MPAs.

Wenzel points out that the national system of MPAs will eventually lead to a national network. "To be an MPA network, whether ecological or institutional, a group of MPAs must be designed or managed for the explicit purpose of connecting individual sites to enhance the benefits they provide," she says. "On a national and regional scale, that type of comprehensive approach has been lacking in the U.S. Most U.S. MPAs have been established over the past three decades, and have been created by a wide range of programs for diverse purposes with little consideration of their interconnections. So although the U.S. has many MPAs, we are not maximizing their conservation benefits. The national system will build institutional networks to support MPAs nationally and regionally, working toward common conservation objectives. In addition, the conservation gap analysis process will identify opportunities to build or enhance ecological networks at the regional or sub-regional scale."

"Our vision for the national system as it evolves is: 'MPAs working together to conserve the nation's ocean ecosystems,'" says Joseph Uravitch, MPA Center Director. For directions on nominating a site for inclusion in the national system, and information on the framework in general, go to <http://mpa.gov>.

### For more information:

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