

For a PDF version of The MPA Guide, go to <https://www.protectedplanet.net/c/mpa-guide>

**Momentum to protect the global ocean and to use Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) as a conservation tool is greater than it has ever been. But realizing the potential will require a common, shared language to understand, celebrate and track achievements and provide clarity about our collective, science-based goal.**

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MPA GUIDE

- Conserving biodiversity in the global ocean
- Reflecting shared goals by refining shared language

THE MARINE PROTECTED AREA (MPA) GUIDE refines existing language and captures a shared vision to describe MPAs and the conservation outcomes they provide. The Guide is the work of many hundreds of stakeholders from around the world. It is a timely and important tool to help drive more and better ocean protection and reflects a collective ambition to find unity in language and consistency in approach.

### THE NEED

MPAs are a central tool for ocean conservation. They are clearly defined by IUCN as areas whose primary objective is the conservation of nature: *An MPA 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*<sup>i</sup>. Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs)<sup>ii</sup> also bring conservation benefit, but that is not their primary objective. MPAs and OECMs together constitute the officially recognized areas to be counted in the global tally of protected areas for Aichi Target 11<sup>iii</sup>.

Despite clear definitions of both MPAs and OECMs, clarification is still needed about what 'protection' actually

means. While the global community works to refine understanding of OECMs, this document focuses on MPAs.

Currently there are different interpretations about what the term 'protected' means in relation to the global ocean. Some view protection as the point at which a government approves the creation of an MPA in law or other authority; others view it as the point at which protection measures are put in place with on-the-water changes in management; others view it as a measure of the effectiveness of the protection. As a result, there are different conclusions about how much of the ocean is 'protected' in MPAs. There is also uncertainty and often false expectations about the conservation outcomes that can be expected from any particular MPA.

There are wide-ranging types of MPAs with various goals and expectations. Some MPAs allow no extraction, while others permit almost all types of extraction. Clearly the outcomes from one type will differ from another.

Inconsistency in determining the amount of protection that exists can obscure real progress and distract attention from the overarching goal of achieving a healthy ocean and conserving biodiversity.

# THE MPA GUIDE

There are two overarching areas where a simple refinement and alignment of the language would bring useful clarity: (1) Stage of Establishment and (2) Level of Protection.

## 1. Stage of Establishment

Establishment of an MPA can take several years from the time a government or other official body makes an initial announcement of intent to create an MPA, to the time when the MPA is implemented and managed. This process is not always linear or unidirectional. Achieving clarity around the stage of establishment is important because biodiversity is not safeguarded within an MPA until the MPA is implemented, enforced, and actively managed. The official tally of protected areas currently includes MPAs at multiple stages of establishment, ranging from the stages of legal designation to on-the-water protection and management.

The MPA Guide recognizes four stages in the multi-step process that is often used by governments or other authorities to establish a new MPA or reclassify or expand an existing one. The stages below appear in the temporal sequence most often used, but each government or responsible entity will follow its own laws, conventions, or processes.

---

**a) PROPOSED/COMMITTED:** The intent to create an MPA is made public, for example through a submission to the Convention on Biological Diversity or other instrument, conference announcement, official press release, or other official declaration<sup>iv</sup>.

---

**b) DESIGNATED:** An MPA is specifically codified or dedicated through legally recognized means or authoritative rule. The MPA now exists 'on paper' and in law or other formal process.

---

**c) IMPLEMENTED:** An MPA transitions from existence on paper to being operational on the water, with concomitant management in place that aims to ensure compliance and enforcement. The MPA has a defined boundary, objectives and management strategy that reflect the primacy of conservation objectives (as per the IUCN definition of an MPA).

---

**d) ACTIVELY MANAGED:** An MPA has demonstrable and ongoing enforceable rules, monitoring, evaluation, adaptive management and conservation outcomes.

---

## 2. Level of Protection

The term 'MPA' is so all-encompassing that it describes an immense range of levels of protection. Labels that have evolved to distinguish among them are not globally uniform. For example, the terms 'marine reserves' and 'marine parks' mean different things in different countries.

By using terms with different meanings, we obscure what is really happening and what conservation outcomes can be expected.

The widely used IUCN categories of Protected Areas effectively delineate types of Protected Areas by Management Objectives and Governance; The MPA Guide clarifies an additional category: level of protection. The MPA Guide recognizes four levels of protection of biodiversity from extractive and destructive activities.

Using existing approaches and language, the levels are assigned using a decision-tree approach<sup>v</sup>. Multi-zone MPAs are categorized based on the amount of area and the level of protection in the different zones. No value judgement is made for any type of MPA; each is respected for its circumstances and evaluated specifically with biodiversity conservation in mind. Compliance and enforcement are essential for each level.

---

**a) FULLY PROTECTED:** no extractive or destructive activities are allowed, and all impacts are minimized.

---

**b) HIGHLY PROTECTED:** only light extractive activities are allowed, and other impacts are minimized to the extent possible.

---

**c) LIGHTLY PROTECTED:** some protection exists but moderate to significant extraction and impacts are allowed.

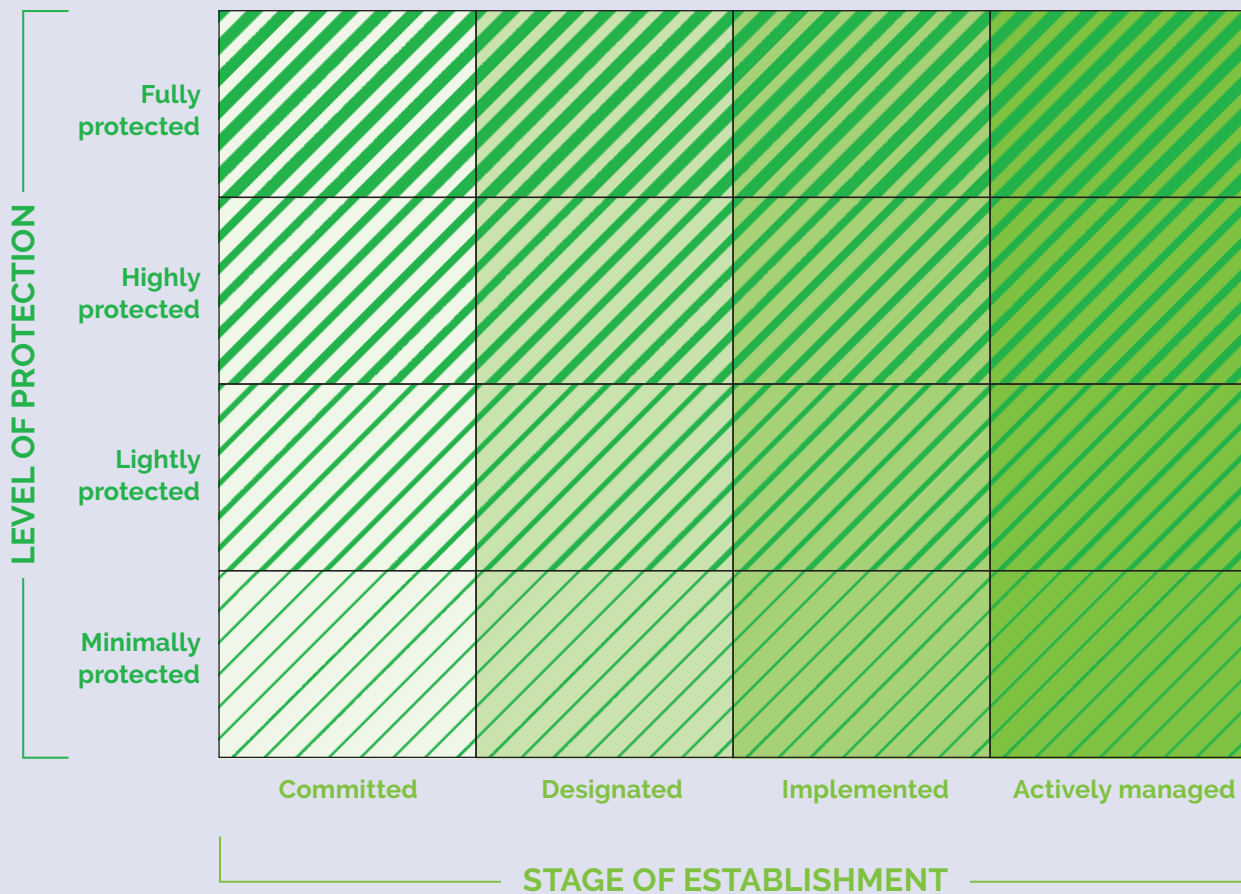
---

**d) MINIMALLY PROTECTED:** extensive extraction and other impacts are allowed while still providing some conservation benefit to the area.

---

In addition to describing the above four **stages of establishment and maintenance** of an MPA and the four **levels of protection** inside the MPA, The MPA Guide clarifies the **likely conservation outcomes** from an MPA depending on its level of protection (see page 4).

## THE MPA GUIDE



### FOOTNOTES

i. [https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/content/documents/applying\\_mpa\\_global\\_standards\\_final\\_version\\_050418.pdf](https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/content/documents/applying_mpa_global_standards_final_version_050418.pdf)  
Full IUCN MPA Standards information found at <https://www.iucn.org/commissions/world-commission-protected-areas/our-work/marine/marine-protected-areas-global-standards-success>

ii. According to the definition adopted at the 14th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 17-29 November, 2018 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, "Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs)" means "a geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained longterm outcomes for

the in situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and, where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socioeconomic, and other locally relevant values"; <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/9b1f/759a/dfcee171bd46b06cc91f6a0d/sbstta-22-l-02-en.pdf>

iii. <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/rationale/target-11/>

iv. The official global tallies for Aichi Target 11 exclude sites that are in the 'Proposed/Committed' Stage of Establishment.

v. The decision tree, expanded definitions and specific MPA examples in the full version of The MPA Guide.

### 3. Expected Conservation Outcomes

Citizens, governments, communities, and stakeholders want to know what results they can expect from an MPA. If the primary impacts to an area come from extractive uses, the outcome will depend primarily on the level of protection and the degree of impact. More heavily impacted areas will normally show a greater ecological response once protection is in place.

The full version of The MPA Guide provides a detailed and scientifically driven list of expected conservation outcomes for each level of protection. We briefly summarize them here. Strong conservation returns are expected from Fully Protected areas; few conservation benefits are expected from Minimally Protected MPAs.

Fully and Highly Protected MPAs are expected to result in greater abundance and size of previously exploited species, restoration of ecological interactions, habitat recovery, enhanced reproductive output due to larger body size of previously exploited species, greater resilience inside the MPA, and stronger potential for adaptation to climate and other environmental changes.

Fully and Highly Protected areas also provide reference areas for evaluating the impacts of extraction outside, a buffer against accidental mismanagement or environmental changes, and often some enhancement of fisheries outside the MPA.

By identifying the very different outcomes of MPAs with different levels of protection, The MPA Guide stresses that not all MPAs are equal for conservation or social outcomes. It provides a template for enhanced clarity and transparency in understanding trade-offs and assessing progress toward ocean protection.

## IN SUMMARY

MPAs are not a panacea, but they are a powerful and underutilized tool to achieve ocean protection.

Refining language already in use, The MPA Guide provides:

### Stages of Establishment

A system of four categories to characterize the stage of establishment and maintenance of any particular MPA:

1. **Proposed/Committed**
2. **Designated**
3. **Implemented**
4. **Actively Managed**

### Levels of Protection

A simple method to categorize an MPA into one of four levels of protection of its biodiversity:

1. **Fully Protected**
2. **Highly Protected**
3. **Lightly Protected**
4. **Minimally Protected**

### Conservation Outcomes

A description of the likely conservation outcomes that can be reasonably expected for an MPA based on its level of protection.

---

**Using The MPA Guide language can help dismantle the roadblocks caused by confusion and inconsistency and accelerate progress towards global marine conservation.**

**The Guide provides a common language, shared understanding, clear definitions, and expected outcomes to bring transparency and clarity to ocean protection.**

---

***HOLISTIC SOLUTIONS THAT CONSIDER PEOPLE AND NATURE are needed to use the ocean sustainably and maintain biodiversity and the benefits it provides. Area-based tools – including MPAs, OECMs, and Marine Managed Areas – can help achieve these goals. Parallel actions are also needed to achieve sustainable fisheries and aquaculture and to reduce carbon emissions and other pollutants including plastics.***