

A new analysis of the world's largest 100 marine protected areas (MPAs) published today in *Conservation Letters* suggests that governments are falling short on delivering the promise of effective biodiversity protection due to slow implementation of management strategies and failure to restrict the most impactful activities.

The assessment, titled "[Ocean protection quality is lagging behind quantity: Applying a scientific framework to assess real marine protected area progress against the 30 by 30 target](#)" was conducted by an international team of researchers led by Marine Conservation Institute. They analyzed the effectiveness of the 100 largest MPAs in the world, which represent 90% of total global MPA coverage. Based on key indicators for success, including management and human activities occurring, the assessment found that:

- **Only one-third of the area designated within these MPAs** provides a level of protection that is likely to yield meaningful conservation benefits.
- **One-quarter of the area within these MPAs is not yet implemented**, meaning that they have not yet been put into place on the water.
- **Over one-third of the area within these MPAs allows industrial or other highly impactful activities**, such as large-scale commercial fishing, which are the leading driver of biodiversity loss in the ocean.
- **Most of the large, fully and highly protected areas are in isolated overseas territories**, such as those designated by the United Kingdom and the United States.

The analysis was based on criteria established by "[The MPA Guide: A framework to achieve global goals for the ocean](#)," published in *Science* in September 2021. These findings suggest that current tracking and reporting methods overestimate the amount and quality of protection provided by MPAs. The assessment also highlights the need to ensure that MPAs are effectively implemented and managed, and that they extend across all marine ecosystems.

MPAs are defined areas of the ocean managed to achieve the long-term conservation of nature, and they aim to protect and recover marine biodiversity, promote healthy and resilient ecosystems, and provide lasting benefits to both people and the planet. However, the assessment's findings raise questions about the effectiveness of current conservation efforts in achieving the declared goals of marine protection.

While MPAs are commonly used as a proven and effective tool for ocean conservation, the analysis highlights wide variation in design, regulations, and management. These variations result in significant disparities in conservation outcomes. For instance, some MPAs allow activities such as mining, industrial fishing, or aquaculture, while others do not. Over 9.7 million square kilometers (or nearly 37%) of the studied area was found to allow highly destructive, industrial-scale activities that are not compatible with conservation. This mismatch between the intended goals of an MPA and the likelihood of achieving those outcomes raises concerns about the efficacy of these areas. Applying the standards of *The MPA Guide* brings clarity to these issues, and some of these areas do not comply with international standards.

Currently, the World Database of Protected Areas lists more than 18,000 MPAs across about 30 million square kilometers (or about 8%) of the global ocean. The 100 largest MPAs overwhelmingly account for most of this total area – about 26.3 million square kilometers (or about 7.3%) of the global ocean. The assessment found that about 19.7 million square kilometers (or 75%) of the studied area was implemented or actively managed, and the remaining 6.7 million square kilometers were yet to be implemented or actively managed. Prior to implementation, MPAs lack regulation and management, essentially making them no different from surrounding waters and unable to confer any conservation benefits. Including these areas in the current tally of marine protection results in a misguided understanding of human impacts on the ocean and marine conservation progress.

The research also points out that large MPAs disproportionately exist in remote areas and overseas territories, leaving important habitats and species unprotected and vulnerable throughout much of the ocean. Regions of the ocean that are already heavily impacted by human activities are those that are likely to deliver the biggest return on investment and need to be included in a representative network of MPAs as nations address Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework (protecting at least 30% of the ocean by 2030).

The Global Biodiversity Framework currently lacks metrics for measuring the quality of protected areas as part of the 30 by 30 goal, and it is critical that MPA quality and standards are reviewed and recorded as part of the accounting process. Otherwise, the predicted ecological and socio-economic benefits derived from marine protection will not be fulfilled.