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CONTACT: Beth Pike
beth.pike@marine-conservation.org
+1 508-322-1020

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Report: Governments Falling Short on Promises of Effective Biodiversity Protection

WASHINGTON— 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 11 researchers. The study analyzed the capacity of the world's 100 largest MPAs to deliver positive biodiversity outcomes, which collectively account for approximately 90% of the total marine protected area globally. The research evaluated the key indicators for success, including management and permitted human activities, based on criteria established by "[The MPA Guide: A framework to achieve global goals for the ocean](#)," published in *Science* in 2021.

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. As the world strives to protect at least 30% of the ocean by 2030—a target set by a United Nations' international agreement—this assessment provides an important reminder that achieving this goal requires both increased quantity and improved quality of marine protected areas. The assessment's findings raise questions about the effectiveness of current conservation efforts in achieving the declared goals of marine protection.

Lead researcher Beth Pike, who directs Marine Conservation Institute's Marine Protection Atlas program (MPAtlas.org), emphasizes the significance of effective design and management for achieving the intended outcomes of marine protected areas.

"MPAs can deliver significant benefits to people, nature, and the planet, but unfortunately, we see vast gaps between the amount of ocean covered by MPAs and the strength of those protections in many cases," Pike said. "Quality—not just quantity—should indicate progress toward reaching the goal of protecting at least 30% of the ocean by 2030."

Currently, the World Database on Protected Areas from the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre lists more than 18,000 marine protected areas covering 30 million square kilometers (or about 8%) of the global ocean. The 100 largest MPAs overwhelmingly account for most of this total – about 26.3 million square kilometers (or about 7.3%) of the global ocean.

The MPA Guide links scientific evidence to conservation outcomes, creating a framework to categorize MPAs and whether MPAs are set up to successfully contribute to conservation outcomes. While MPAs are commonly considered proven and effective tools for ocean conservation, the report highlights wide variations in design, goals, regulations, and management. For instance, some MPAs allow activities such as oil and gas exploration, industrial fishing, or aquaculture, while others are highly protected. This mismatch between the declared goals of an MPA and the likelihood of delivering those outcomes raises concerns about the efficacy of these protected areas.

According to the analysis, one-third of reported MPA area allows industrial-scale, damaging activities, and another quarter of the area (6.7 million square kilometers) is not yet implemented on the water. Without regulations or management, these areas are no different from surrounding waters and cannot deliver 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 study's authors also point 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.

"Successfully conserving ocean biodiversity, and its benefits to human wellbeing, from the consequences of destructive activities can only be achieved with a clear understanding of global progress," said Dr. Kirsten Grorud-Colvert, associate professor at Oregon State University, who co-authored the assessment and was lead author of *The MPA Guide*. "This assessment identifies challenges but also points to a clear, evidence-based path to achieve actual and effective protection and to provide lasting, just support for a healthy and resilient ocean."

Dona Bertarelli, a philanthropist, ocean advocate, and Patron of Nature for the International Union for Conservation of Nature said: "Growing understanding, support and momentum toward area-based global targets such as 30 by 30 are crucial for moving the dial on ocean conservation – but only provide meaningful progress when effective. Well-designed, managed, and enforced MPAs can provide enormous benefits for both people and nature. Now is the time for collective action – before it's too late for our ocean and planet."

Marine Conservation Institute president, Dr. Lance Morgan, added, "With six years remaining to meet the 2030 target this report clearly shows us the urgency with which we need to designate and implement effective conservation areas that will deliver on the commitment of the Global Biodiversity Framework."

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About Marine Conservation Institute

Marine Conservation Institute, founded in 1996, is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring marine ecosystems and works in the U.S. and globally to seek strong protection for at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. Marine Conservation Institute publishes the [Marine Protection Atlas](#), which provides comprehensive information on the world's marine protected areas. Learn more at <https://marine-conservation.org/>.

Quotes from Co-Authors

Joachim Claudet (CNRS): “We have shown that much of the Ocean is not protected, and two thirds of what is supposed to be protected does not convey regulations strict enough to confer any ecological benefit. It is important to ensure that the race to meet key biodiversity targets does not lead us to a false sense of security about appropriate actions being undertaken. We believe that classifying MPAs according to their protection levels as we did here is necessary in order to shed light on the fact that current efforts are insufficient with respect to managing human uses of nature at sea. We hope this will translate into more action by policy-makers to establish and appropriately manage MPAs with protection levels that are able to deliver tangible benefits for biodiversity conservation.”

Barbara Horta e Costa: “Not all MPAs are the same. This study allows a better understanding of the MPA quality we can expect in the so advertised 100 largest MPAs in the world. Having the largest MPA does not mean having an effective MPA and the public and decision-makers need to better understand what means what. This study is central to inform what types of MPAs are out there and actually contributing to ocean health.”

Emanuel Gonçalves (Oceano Azul Foundation and MARE): “This paper shows that a large proportion of the area that was supposed to be protected in the ocean is in fact still open to some of the most impactful activities and/or not regulated nor implemented. In spite of advances in commitments and intentions, the real and effective protection of the ocean is still lagging far behind what those commitments call for. This means that we need to fix what exists and also that we need to do different moving forward, namely by bringing the international standards of IUCN and *The MPA Guide* to implement networks of MPAs with the scale, speed and impact required to protect what is left and recover what we have lost due to overexploitation and other impacts in the ocean.”

Angelo Villagomez (Center for American Progress): “The last 15 years has seen an explosion of ocean protections -- from less than <1% to >8%. Yet, our analysis shows many are either poorly designed or enforced, and often in the overseas territories of powerful countries, raising questions of justice and habitat representation. This should be seen as progress but provides a sobering reminder that leaders need to move beyond 30x30 areas targets and (1) focus on creating equitable networks of protected areas, (2) containing different habitat types along a spectrum of protection levels, that are (3) adequately staffed and funded.”

Sarah Hameed (Marine Conservation Institute): “What a tragedy it will be if the global community comes together and achieves 30x30 by covering 30% of the ocean in MPAs that don't have strong enough regulations to safeguard marine ecosystems or are otherwise ineffective. We have to do better to conserve the biodiversity of our ocean – we need to ensure that our MPA efforts are meaningful.”

Jessica MacCarthy (Marine Conservation Institute): “While MPAs have the potential to provide substantial benefits to nature and people, our analysis indicates that much of the current MPA coverage lacks the implementation, regulation, and management needed to truly protect marine ecosystems. For meaningful progress toward 30x30, policymakers must prioritize creating and sustaining well-designed and managed MPAs with robust regulations capable of driving positive changes for biodiversity.”

Jenna Sullivan-Stack (Oregon State University): “When people hear that an area of ocean is a “marine protected area”, we expect a healthy ocean area with abundant marine life that sustains local communities in the long term. That's not always the case. Here we've used a standardized assessment method to provide an evidence-based understanding of where we actually stand on ocean protection in MPAs, and we show that a large portion of the global marine protected area is not actually set up or functioning to achieve these goals. This understanding gives us a roadmap for action to improve the

effectiveness of MPAs. This understanding, and the solutions it provides, are vital to making sure existing and new MPAs live up to their potential.”