

The Malta Declaration: Assessing real progress towards effective ocean protection

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The Issue

The United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) established a target of 10% of the ocean to be protected by 2020 ('Aichi Target 11'). The UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) reinforces this commitment. Many scientists argue the 10% target is a first milestone for global ocean protection, not an endpoint. Scientific studies suggest that at least 30% of the ocean should be protected to achieve the desired benefits (1). Echoing the need for greater protection, the IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2016 adopted the goal of 30% by 2030. However, despite remarkable progress in the last decade, we need to do much more to reach even the 10% goal by 2020. To make matters more challenging, many areas claimed by some countries as "protected" are, in fact, not protected. Only those protected areas that prohibit extractive or destructive activities are in fact protected. Therefore, 'fully protected' or 'strongly protected' marine reserves should be the protected areas of choice to achieve CBD's and the SDG's targets of global ocean protection. We hereby commit to working with the broader community to clarify and harmonize the language and approaches to achieve meaningful protection of coastal and ocean biodiversity, consistent with the Aichi and SDG goals.

1. Fully protected (no-take) marine reserves are the most effective type of protected area in the ocean

There is abundant evidence that fully protected marine reserves are the most effective type of protected area for restoring and protecting biodiversity. Commonly called 'marine reserves', fully-protected areas on average increase species richness by over 20%, organism size by over 25%, and total fish biomass by over 600% relative to unprotected areas nearby (2, 3). In contrast, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that allow some or a lot of fishing (called 'partially protected areas') typically do not even double fish biomass compared to unprotected areas (3, 4). In addition, marine reserves help restore the complexity of ecosystems through a chain of ecological effects once the abundance of large animals and habitat-structuring species recovers sufficiently. Marine reserves may not be immune to the effects of climate change, but evidence to date indicates that reserves with complex ecosystems tend to be more resilient than unprotected areas (5).

Evidence shows that partially protected MPAs do not deliver the same biodiversity and conservation benefits as fully protected areas. They can,

however, provide other useful outcomes for fishery management or conflict avoidance where multiple uses occur. They can, for example, help restore the abundance of some commercial species by banning specific fishing gears, or prevent habitat destruction by excluding bottom trawling. Because these areas are tools to manage fisheries or other uses, they should be called “marine managed areas” not “Marine Protected Areas”. They help manage fishing better, but do not allow for full ecosystem recovery. Calling an area that allows fishing “protected” is like calling a logging concession a “protected forest”.

Although marine reserves were conceived to protect ecosystems within their boundaries, they have also been shown to enhance local fisheries and create jobs and new incomes through ecotourism (6), while also serving as insurance against mistakes and uncertainty (7,8). Therefore, fully protected or strongly protected marine reserves should be the protected areas of choice to achieve CBD’s and the SDG’s targets for global ocean protection.

2. Current protection has been overestimated

In June 2017, the Executive Secretary of the CBD claimed at the United Nations Ocean Conference that, based on reports from member countries, 5.7% of the ocean was already protected, and that we are on track to exceed the 10% target by 2020. But the most accurate and widely accepted tally of all MPAs that have been implemented as of September 2017 is only 3.1% of the global ocean (mpatlas.org) (Figure 1). An additional 2.1% of the ocean has been designated as protected, but not yet implemented. An additional 2.2% of the ocean would be protected if various proposals by conservation organizations and commitments by countries were fulfilled. In the spirit of transparency and accountability, none of these areas should count as currently protected until they are actually protected. If all of the announced and planned MPAs were implemented, by 2020, 7.3% of the ocean would be covered by implemented MPAs. While the global community should celebrate this progress, it falls short of the 10% target. (In striking contrast, the 17% target of lands protected has already almost been reached.)

Not only is more area being ‘counted’ as protected than is accurate, but also many of the implemented and announced MPAs are in fact not even really protected. To date, only 1.5% of the global ocean is strongly protected (that is, in no-take or minimal-take marine reserves where all fishing, mining, oil and gas or any other extractive activity is prohibited, or in MPAs where only minimal recreational or artisanal fishing occurs). The 10% target is not impossible, but a significant effort must continue if we are to reach it. To claim we are close is false and counterproductive.

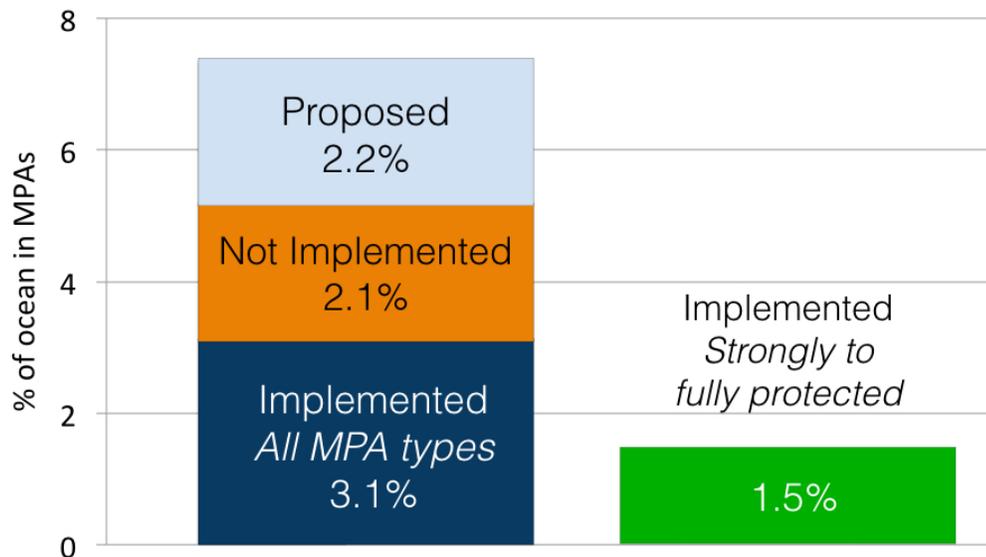


Figure 1. Percentages of the ocean under protection in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that have already been implemented, areas that may have been designated but have not been yet implemented, and areas that have been proposed by countries or conservation organizations (left bar). Only half of the implemented MPAs as of September 2017 are strongly to fully protected (right). Source: mpatlas.org

3. MPAs that don't provide real protection should not count as "protected areas"

CBD's Aichi Target 11 falls under Strategic Goal C: "To improve the status of biodiversity by safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic diversity." Extractive activities tend to *degrade* biodiversity instead of *improve* it – except if non-native species harmful to local ecosystems are being removed. Areas that allow anything more than very minimal fishing or other extractive activities cannot safeguard whole ecosystems, and these should not count towards the CBD target.

The term 'MPA' is now being used so loosely that it no longer connotes meaningful protection. As currently used, the term is a catchall bucket that contains everything from fully protected marine reserves to an area in which only one species is protected or one activity is disallowed. Even fishery management areas are counted as "protected" by some countries.

We should absolutely celebrate the great progress made with MPAs over the last decade – just a decade ago, only 0.1% of the ocean was strongly protected (9) compared to today's 1.5% – but we should not assert that more protection exists than is real and verifiable. In the end, it's the on- and in-the-water protection that really counts. MPAs that are just lines on a map, without any implemented

conservation regulation or management plan, should not count and should not be accepted in national or global tallies until they are truly protected.

If we are to get to 10% of the ocean protected by 2020, we need to implement what has been committed, enact what has been suggested, and create new fully protected areas. We commit to working with the broader community to clarify and harmonize the language and approaches to achieve the Aichi and SDG targets and goals. We will report back at Our Ocean 2018 on progress toward that goal. We also call on nations of the world to accelerate the creation, implementation, and enforcement of genuine protected areas within their exclusive economic zones and in the high seas.

References

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