

Marine Protected Areas

Read the passage below.

How do oceans affect you? If you live far from the coast, you might think they don't. But life on this planet depends on the oceans. They cover almost three-quarters of the planet and hold 97 percent of the Earth's water. The phytoplankton that live on the oceans' surface produce 70 percent of the oxygen in the atmosphere. Oceans are a vital source of food and other resources, and an economic engine for many communities.

For all the oceans provide us, we haven't always been so responsible in our stewardship. "The ocean was thought of as a dumping ground for so long," says Caitlyn Toropova of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). "There was a sense that there was no way we could harm it because it is so vast."

But human activities are having a negative impact on many of the world's oceans, jeopardizing marine life, habitat, and ecosystems. These threats include overfishing or destructive fishing, coastal development, pollution and runoff, and the introduction of non-native species. Climate change is also having a big effect by causing warming seas and rising acidification.

The realization that something needs to be done to stem or reverse the damage has led to the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Broadly speaking, marine protected areas are regions of the ocean where human activity is limited. Specifics differ around the globe, but the United States defines a marine protected area as "any area of the marine environment that has been reserved by federal, state, tribal, territorial, or local laws or regulations to provide lasting protection for part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein."

There are approximately 5,000 designated MPAs around the world, and many more that are not officially recognized, says Toropova, the conservation group's coordination officer for marine protected areas. The United States has 1,700 MPAs.

That may sound like a lot, but only about one percent of the world's oceans are protected. Countries around the world have committed to protecting 10 percent, Toropova says. But "even though there's been an increase in the past 10 years, at the current rate it would take 100 years to reach that goal," she says.