

# Developing a National System of Marine Protected Areas



## Background

In the United States and around the world, marine protected areas (MPAs) are increasingly recognized as an important and promising management tool for conserving vital marine habitats and resources. When used effectively and as part of a broader ecosystem-based approach to management, MPAs can help stem the impacts of coastal development, overfishing, a changing climate and natural events, and offer social and economic opportunities for current and future generations.

There are nearly 1,800 existing MPAs in the U.S. that have been established by federal, state, territorial, and local governments. These MPAs have been designated to achieve a myriad of conservation objectives, ranging from conservation of biodiversity hotspots, to preservation of sunken historic vessels, to protection of spawning aggregations important to commercial and recreational fisheries. Similarly, the level of protection provided by these MPAs ranges from no-take marine reserves to allowing multiple uses, including fishing.

Recognizing the significant role that U.S. MPAs play in conserving marine heritage and sustainable use, and the lack of a national framework for comprehensive MPA planning, coordination and support, Presidential Executive Order 13158 of May 26, 2000 calls for the development of a national system of MPAs. The *Revised Draft Framework for Developing the National System of MPAs* describes this system. Incorporating a first round of public comments from 2007, the revised draft will be available for a final public comment period in early 2008.

## National System Purpose

The purpose of the national system is to support the effective stewardship, conservation, restoration, sustainable use and public understanding and appreciation of the nation's significant natural and cultural marine heritage and to provide for sustainable production of the nation's resources with due consideration of the interests of and implications for all who use and care about our marine environments.

## National System Goals



**Natural Heritage:** Advance comprehensive conservation and management of the nation's biological communities, habitats, ecosystems, and processes, and the ecological services, uses, and values they provide to this and future generations through ecosystem-based MPA approaches.



**Cultural Heritage:** Advance comprehensive conservation and management of cultural resources that reflect the nation's maritime history and traditional cultural connections to the sea, as well as the uses and values they provide to this and future generations through ecosystem-based MPA approaches.



**Sustainable Production:** Advance comprehensive conservation and management of the nation's renewable living resources and their habitats, including, but not limited to, spawning, mating, and nursery grounds, and areas established to minimize incidental by-catch of species that are important to the nation's social, economic, and cultural well-being through ecosystem-based MPA approaches.

## Benefits of an Effective National System

A national system offers numerous benefits above and beyond the benefits realized by participating MPA sites and programs. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Enhanced Conservation** - representativeness; connectivity; enhanced stewardship; and a framework in which MPAs and programs can address conservation issues beyond their scope of authority
- **Social and Economic Benefits** - increased tourism; sustained fisheries; maintained coastal community identity; and non-extractive uses (e.g. aesthetic appeal)
- **Public Awareness, Understanding and Education** - increased support for marine conservation; more effective and efficient outreach; promotion of cultural heritage; and enhanced educational and research opportunities
- **Enhanced Coordination and Strategic Direction** - shared national system conservation objectives; improved gap analysis and planning; and enhanced interagency cooperation

## Functions of the National System

As MPA sites, programs, and systems are added to the national system, efforts to implement the national system both regionally and nationally will evolve over time. A major emphasis of the MPA Center will be to facilitate and support collaborative implementation efforts with participating MPA sites and programs, pending available resources. National system implementation components include:

- **Enhancing Regional Coordination and Collaboration** - formalizing new and/or supporting existing regional mechanisms to provide for effective, efficient coordination and collaboration among participating MPA sites, systems, and programs
  - Improving MPA stewardship and effectiveness
  - Regional MPA planning
- **National and International Coordination** - establishing and implementing a National System Steering Committee to link across regions where resource conservation and MPA planning and management issues span regional boundaries, and identifying and pursuing international MPA linkages to the national system
- **Evaluating National System Effectiveness** - providing technical and scientific support for fostering sound monitoring and evaluation programs at the participating MPA site or system level, as well as development of a set of standards and protocols for assessing broader national system effectiveness.
- **Federal Agency Responsibilities to Avoid Harm** - providing guidance regarding Section 5 of the Executive Order, which requires federal agencies to “avoid harm” to the natural and cultural resources protected by MPAs that become part of the national system
- **Tracking and Reporting** - maintaining the [www.mpa.gov](http://www.mpa.gov) website, and producing a biennial State of the National System report, and other mechanisms for communicating national system activities, progress and plans

## For More Information

Lauren Wenzel, National System Development Coordinator  
NOAA National Marine Protected Areas Center  
[lauren.wenzel@noaa.gov](mailto:lauren.wenzel@noaa.gov)  
(301) 563-1136

