National Marine Protected Areas Center
West Coast Pilot:
Ecological Characterization Project

About the West Coast Pilot

Because the west coast—California, Oregon, and Washington—is currently at the forefront of federal, state, and tribal MPA activity, the National Marine Protected Areas Center is leading a collaborative initiative there to pilot key methods and approaches for developing regional systems of MPAs. This project involves developing, testing, and applying analytical tools, and gathering the best information, including science-based data and traditional ecological knowledge, to better understand how to more effectively use MPAs to sustain healthy marine environments. The products and lessons offered by this pilot will serve as a foundation for other regional MPA planning, as part of a larger effort to develop a U.S. national system of MPAs. The data collected will also be useful for numerous other ecosystem approaches to management that require the same comprehensive information.

Pilot Partners

The West Coast Pilot is an unprecedented effort that requires core partnerships among the region's federal, state, and tribal government agencies. Key NOAA partners include the National Marine Sanctuary Program, National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science, and the National Marine Fisheries Service. In addition, the participation of the following regional partners is instrumental to the effort's success: the Department of the Interior's National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the National Estuarine Research Reserves System; the Pacific Fishery Management Council; academic institutions, and other non-governmental organizations.

Background: The Ecological Characterization Project

An ecological characterization of marine natural resources is a vital first step to any ecosystem-based approach to managing biological and physical marine resources. It is a comprehensive inventory that synthesizes relevant existing and historical information on the ecology of the area.

Project Description

The goal of the ecological characterization component is to provide the comprehensive natural resource data necessary to support an ecosystem approach for developing a regional system of MPAs on the west coast. The project is designed to inventory, synthesize, and characterize biological, physical, and oceanographic information on the marine environments off the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington from coastal estuaries out to 200 nautical miles.

Project Objectives

- Develop a methodology to characterize natural resources for the west coast of the U.S.
- Develop knowledge and products on the distribution and ecology of living marine resources in the coastal and marine environments of the west coast of the U.S.
- Develop necessary partnerships, and identify and integrate available datasets as a pilot for application in other regions.
- Provide resource managers, scientists, and the public with an improved ecosystem basis for decision making.

Products

- **West coast ecological characterization.** Synthesized information on the biological, physical and oceanographic setting that will be made available on CD-ROM with associated spatial data. The characterization will also include an ecosystem diagram that describes the bio-geographic zones and ecosystem, as well as a map series that includes bathymetry.
- **Multi-layered atlas.** Details the physical and oceanographic setting and the geographic distribution of fishes, marine invertebrates, seabirds, and marine mammals.
- **Ecological linkages report.** Describes the potential ecological linkages within the west coast study area.
- **Contacts list.** Directory of scientists collecting primary and secondary ecological data.

For More Information

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