

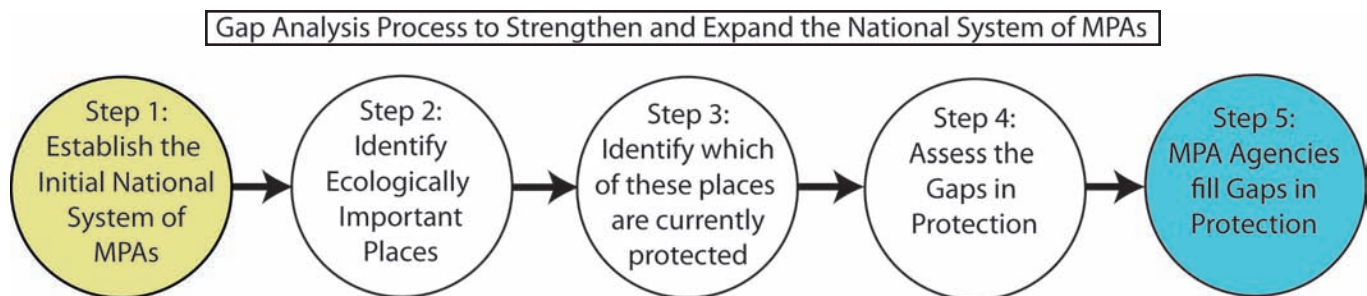
BUILDING THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF MPAs: FILLING GAPS IN PROTECTION FOR IMPORTANT PLACES IN OUR OCEANS

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The framework for a comprehensive, science-based and effective national system of marine protected areas (MPAs) in U.S. waters was recently released by NOAA and the Department of the Interior. The national system will include eligible existing MPAs across all levels of government, as well as those established in the future by agencies to protect important habitats and resources.

CREATING A NATIONAL SYSTEM OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS: While our oceans may seem vast and uniform, certain areas have special ecological, economic or cultural significance. Some, but not all, of these places fall within marine protected areas: a management tool used worldwide to conserve important resources and habitats. Recognizing the critical national importance of these special ocean places, the United States (U.S.) is building a comprehensive, science-based national system of marine protected areas (MPAs) to enhance the conservation of the nation's natural and cultural marine heritage, and to ensure the sustainable production of harvested resources. Following the release of the *Framework for the National System of Marine Protected Areas of the United States of America* (Framework) in late 2008, the initial suite of national system MPAs will be inaugurated in Spring 2009 (See Step 1 in Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Long-Term Development Process for the National System of MPAs



IDENTIFYING GAPS IN PROTECTION TO STRENGTHEN AND EXPAND THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF MPAs: (see Steps 2-5 in Figure 1) Led by NOAA's National MPA Center, the national system of MPAs will enhance the effectiveness of existing national system MPAs through coordination, science and technical assistance. It will also work with other management agencies to identify gaps in protection among important ocean areas whose current management does not adequately address existing or emerging threats from human uses. Both priorities will be addressed through a collaborative *gap analysis process* designed to guide the developing national system of MPAs as well to inform and support its partner MPA programs and sites across the U.S.

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NOAA's National Marine Protected Areas (MPA) Center's mission is to facilitate the effective use of science, technology, training, and information in the planning, management, and evaluation of the nation's system of marine protected areas. The MPA Center works in partnership with federal, state, tribal, and local governments and stakeholders to develop a science-based, comprehensive national system of MPAs. These collaborative efforts will lead to a more efficient, effective use of MPAs now and in the future to conserve and sustain the nation's vital marine resources.



Key components of the gap analysis process include:

1. **Establishing the Initial National System of MPAs** - Following the release of the Framework, the first group of existing MPAs will be inaugurated into the national system in Spring 2009.
2. **Identifying Ecologically Important Areas** - The MPA Center will bring regional science experts together in a participatory GIS workshop to map the location of ecologically important areas corresponding to the national system's priority conservation objectives.
3. **Identifying Current Protection for Important Places** - Using its unique national inventory of MPAs in U.S. waters, the MPA Center will identify and assess the location, type and level of protection afforded by existing U.S. MPAs to those ecologically important areas, and to the national system's priority conservation objectives.
4. **Comprehensively Assessing Gaps in Protection** - Working closely with other MPA agencies and stakeholders, and using the best available ecological, ocean uses, and governance data, the MPA Center will evaluate regional gaps in protection for regionally important ocean areas.
5. **Supporting MPA Agencies in Filling Gaps** - Using the results of the collaborative gap analysis process, the MPA Center will work with partner agencies at all levels of government who have the authority to enhance the effectiveness of existing MPAs or expand protections to threatened important areas to fill critical gaps.



BROAD APPLICATIONS FOR THE GAP ANALYSIS PRODUCTS: Although born from a need to develop a science-based national system of MPAs for the U.S., the gap analysis process has many applications and many clients. By working collaboratively with a variety of agencies and stakeholders, the MPA Center will design and execute this process to create data, map products and planning tools that can inform and support all forms of ocean management. These range from local marine parks, to regional fisheries management, to ocean energy siting, to ocean zoning schemes. Beginning on the West Coast in 2009, the gap analysis process will be conducted regionally around the U.S. over the coming years.



For more information, visit www.mpa.gov

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