

# Developing the National System of Marine Protected Areas: West Coast Pilot



## Plotting the National System on the West Coast

Under Executive Order 13158, the United States is developing a comprehensive and effective national system of marine protected areas (MPAs) focused on conserving our natural and cultural heritage and ensuring the sustainable production of commercially and recreationally vital species. The National Marine Protected Areas Center, housed within the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and run in cooperation with the Department of the Interior, is working collaboratively with federal, state, and tribal programs and with the public to ensure a strong foundation of scientific information and stakeholder input for this ocean conservation effort.

The west coast - California, Oregon, and Washington - is at the forefront of federal, state, and tribal MPA activity and has a growing interest in place-based marine ecosystem management. For these reasons, the MPA Center will lead an initiative to pilot some of the key ecosystem-based methods and approaches for designing and managing an effective regional system of MPAs on the west coast. Working closely with MPA programs, tribes, and stakeholder groups in the region, this effort will involve developing, testing, and applying analytical tools and using the best information, including science-based data and traditional ecological knowledge, to more effectively use MPAs as a means to maintain healthy, sustainable marine ecosystems. This multi-year endeavor, and the lessons it will offer, will serve as a basis for planning and building a comprehensive national system that meets regional needs to conserve natural heritage and sustainable production.

## Project Goals and Focus

The west coast pilot's goals are to facilitate the effective use of MPAs as an ecosystem management tool, to conserve and protect vital marine areas and resources on the west coast, and to inform the development of a regionally-based national system of MPAs.

Some of the outputs and products expected from the pilot include:

- A suite of tools, methods, and information for regional MPA planning and adaptive management that will provide the ability to identify:
  - human use patterns in a regional, ecosystem context
  - ecologically important areas
  - important submerged cultural resources
  - governance structure for west coast marine protected areas
- An ongoing regional forum for west coast state, federal, and tribal programs to efficiently coordinate their management of existing MPAs and collaboratively plan future conservation efforts.
- The ability to integrate data layers and identify regionally-based priority ecological and submerged cultural resource areas in need of new or enhanced protection and management.

## Project Components

Work on the pilot project will involve two inter-dependent components: a scientific assessment and analysis track, and an agency and stakeholder planning track.

**Science and Assessment:** The following key scientific assessment and analysis efforts will provide the natural and social science foundation for identifying significant gaps in current protection of important marine cultural and ecosystem resources, services and values:

- *Resource Characterizations.* Synthesis of existing data on: (a) the distribution and connectivity of marine habitats, resources and ecosystem processes; and (b) the location, status and historical significance of submerged cultural resources along the Pacific coast.
- *Patterns and Impacts of Human Use.* Synthesis of existing and new data from stakeholders on how, when and where people use marine ecosystems, and assessment of the potential impacts of those uses on ecosystems, cultural resources and other uses.
- *Contributions of Existing MPAs.* Synthesis of key information about the location, purpose, level of protection, and potential ecosystem impacts for all place-based areas on the west coast, including a compilation of de facto marine areas that restrict access for reasons other than conservation (e.g. security zones).

**Agency and Stakeholder Planning:** The agency and stakeholder planning component of the west coast pilot will use the scientific analyses developed to collaboratively identify priority national system conservation and management priorities for the west coast.

- *Federal, State, and Tribal Participation.* West coast federal, state, regional, and tribal agencies will be invited to collaboratively scope out and implement the pilot project. In 2006, a workshop of these MPA programs and other interested agencies was convened to initiate this effort.
- *Governance Framework Overview.* Understanding which agencies have authority over different activities in a given geographic area is key for successful place-based planning and management. The MPA Center will develop a comprehensive overview of MPA policy at the international, federal, state, and tribal levels.
- *Stakeholder Input.* The MPA Center and partners will actively engage and seek advice from stakeholders throughout the west coast pilot. The MPA Center will communicate progress via regular updates in MPA.gov, newsletters, and other outlets.

## Partners:

The west coast pilot is an ambitious undertaking and to succeed requires the collaboration of MPA programs and management authorities, with meaningful input from other stakeholders in the region. Some of these partners include federal programs, such as the National Marine Sanctuary Program, National Center for Coastal Ocean Science, National Estuarine Research Reserve System (a federal/state partnership), NOAA Fisheries, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; state and local agencies; the Pacific Fishery Management Council; federally-recognized tribes; academic and research institutions; and other interested partners. Providing a forum for integrating the multiple MPA efforts within the region at the state, federal, tribal, and local levels will not only enhance the effectiveness of existing MPAs, but result in more efficient, science-based approaches to their future use and the management of the marine environment.

## Timeframe:

The collaboration of multiple partners in the region is essential to successfully completing each element of this effort. Scoping of the pilot with partners began in 2006; the project will take several years to complete depending on the availability of information and resources.

## For Additional Information

### West Coast Pilot Co-Leads:

#### *Science*

Charles M. Wahle, Ph.D, Director  
MPA Center Science Institute  
(831) 242-2052  
charles.wahle@noaa.gov

#### *Agency Coordination*

Sarah Fischer, Pacific Regional Coordinator  
National Marine Protected Areas Center  
(831) 242-2054  
sarah.fischer@noaa.gov

### National System Coordinator:

Jonathan Kelsey  
National Marine Protected Areas Center  
(301) 563-1130  
jonathan.kelsey@noaa.gov

