

Chances are, if you love the ocean, you've visited a marine protected area and may not even have known it. If you've gone fishing in central California, diving in the Florida Keys, camping in Acadia National Park, swimming at Cape Hatteras National Seashore, snorkeling in the Virgin Islands, birding at Padre Island in Texas, hiking along the Olympic Coast in Washington, or boating in Thunder Bay, Michigan, you've probably been one of millions of visitors to a marine protected area.



Get Involved

Find out what you can do to help our oceans and marine protected areas.

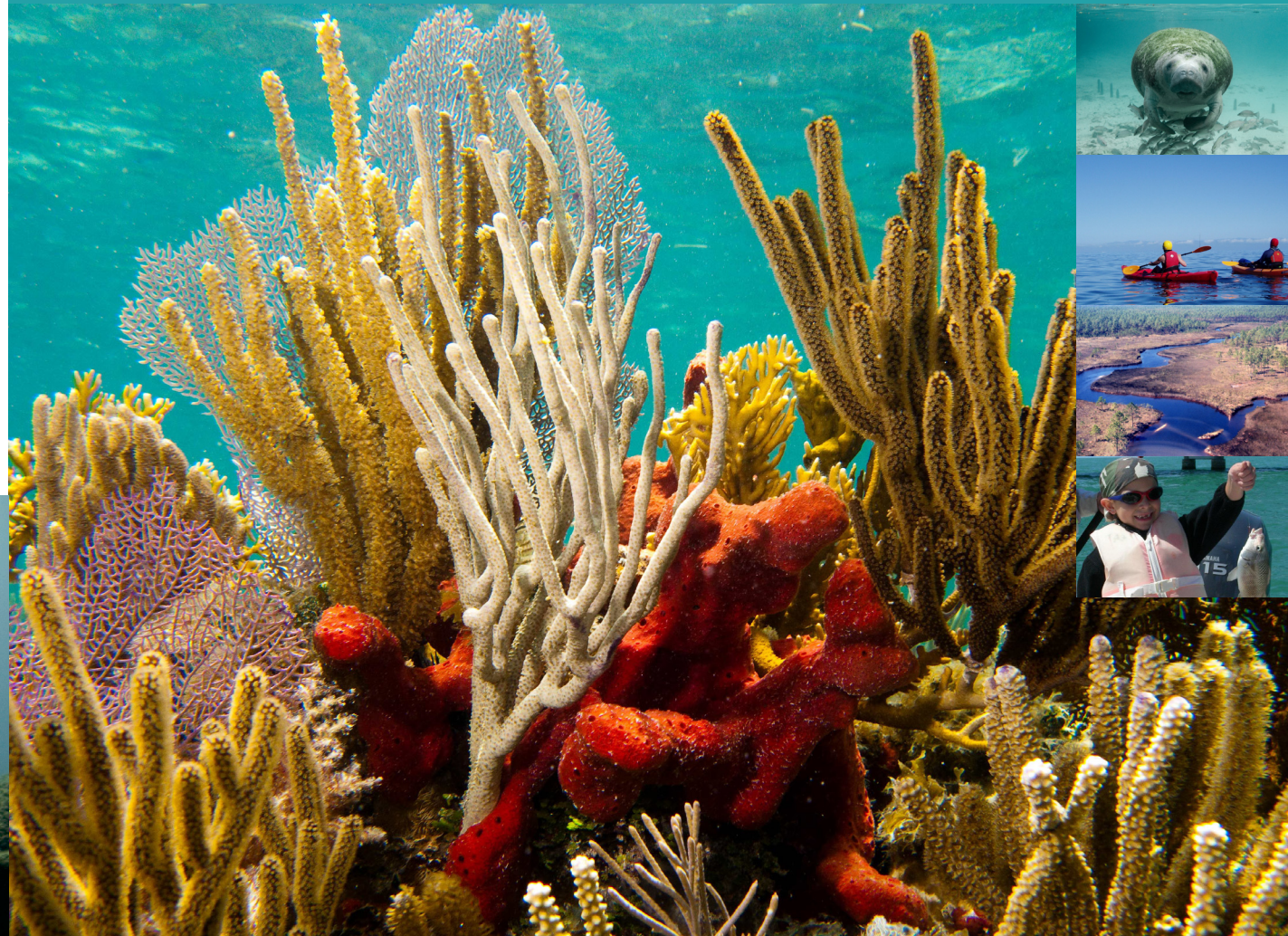
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MARINE PROTECTED AREAS



What is an MPA?

Marine protected areas are special places like coastal or underwater parks that protect habitats, fish and wildlife, and cultural resources. While some people assume that marine protected areas are closed to fishing and other uses, “marine protected area” is a broad term that includes places with a wide range of purposes, legal authorities and levels of protection. What they have in common is a focus on the long-term conservation of coastal and ocean resources.

The world’s oceans and coasts are increasingly threatened by development, pollution, overfishing, climate change and natural events, which strain the health of our marine ecosystems. Marine protected areas are a tool to help reduce stress on marine ecosystems. They can also serve as an “insurance policy” by conserving biological diversity, protecting spawning and nursery areas, and protecting habitats like barrier islands, coral reefs and wetlands that shield communities from coastal storms and flooding. These benefits, along with other economic benefits from recreation, tourism and fishing, help sustain local communities.

Marine protected areas span a range of habitats including the open ocean, coastal areas, inter-tidal zones, estuaries, and the Great Lakes. Networks of marine protected areas can connect these diverse habitats, providing protection to species that use different habitats at different stages of their lives. The U.S. national system of marine protected areas connects marine protected areas managed by diverse federal and state programs so they can work together on common conservation challenges.



Protecting Diverse Ocean Resources

Marine protected areas have been used for centuries by many tribal and Pacific Island cultures to sustain marine resources for long term use. In fact, the term “taboo” comes from the Polynesian word “tabu” meaning forbidden or sacred. This concept was applied to many aspects of life, including declaring certain areas off limits to fishing. The first modern marine protected area in the United States was Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, which was established in 1903 to protect pelicans and other birds from rampant hunting for feathers to decorate women’s hats.

Today, marine protected areas protect a wide range of ocean and coastal resources, from valuable habitats such as coral reefs and seagrasses, to threatened species, to cultural resources such as shipwrecks or submerged archeological sites. Marine protected areas protect these resources through a range of management measures that are targeted at the specific goals and objectives of the area.

For example, marine protected areas that aim to restore fisheries may focus on fishery restrictions, while marine protected areas aiming to protect coral reefs may focus on establishing mooring buoys to avoid anchoring impacts on coral, or on education and outreach to minimize impacts from snorkelers and divers. Many marine protected areas, like National Marine Sanctuaries and National Parks, focus on protecting entire ecosystems, and use a variety of management approaches.

Most marine protected areas in U.S. waters allow diverse uses, including fishing, swimming and diving. However, a small area of the ocean – about 3% of US waters – prohibits fishing and other extractive uses to provide the maximum protection to ocean resources located there. These areas, called “marine reserves” protect marine life and habitat within their boundaries, and can also help sustain marine life outside their boundaries through the “spillover” of larvae and adults from inside the reserve.