

Joining the National System of MPAs: Frequently Asked Questions



National Marine Protected Areas Center

The nation's hub for building innovative partnerships and tools to protect special ocean places.

What is the national system of marine protected areas?

The national system of marine protected areas (MPAs) includes MPA sites, networks and systems established and managed by federal, state, tribal and/or local governments that have chosen to work together on shared conservation priorities. Recognizing that an MPA system is greater than the sum of its parts, these programs collaborate to strengthen conservation of the nation's natural and cultural marine heritage and represent its diverse ecosystems and resources. National System MPAs are managed independently, but work together at the regional and national levels to achieve common objectives.

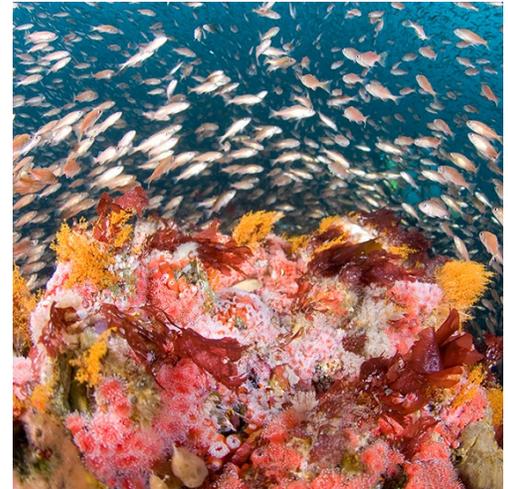
Why do we need a national system of marine protected areas?

Over the past century, over 1,700 MPAs have been created in U.S. waters by a mix of federal, state, and local legislation, voter initiatives, and regulations, each established for its own specific purpose. As a result, the nation's collection of MPAs (parks, reserves, refuges, preserves, sanctuaries and others) is fragmented and complex. The national system provides new opportunities for broader regional and national marine conservation through coordinated

planning and new partnerships. In 2000, a broad coalition of scientists petitioned the White House to create a national system of MPAs to improve conservation of the nation's marine ecosystems, cultural resources, and fisheries. Presidential Executive Order 13158 was signed on May 26, 2000, directing the Department of Commerce to work with the Department of the Interior, other federal agencies, states, territories and stakeholders to establish a national system of MPAs to integrate and enhance the nation's MPAs, bringing these diverse sites and programs together to work on common conservation objectives.

How do I know if my site is an MPA?

A marine protected area is defined by Executive Order 13158 as "an area of the marine environment that has been reserved by federal, state, territorial, tribal, or local laws or regulations to provide lasting protection for part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein." The key terms within this definition (marine, area, reserved, lasting, and protection) have been further defined, with public review and participation, within the *Framework for the National System of Marine Protected Areas of the United States of America* (Framework), available at marineprotectedareas.noaa.gov. MPAs include sites with a wide range of protection, from multiple use areas to no take reserves. The term MPA refers only to the marine portion of a site (below the mean high tide mark), and also includes aquatic areas in the Great Lakes.



Photos: NOAA (Cordell Bank; Manta Ray); NPS (Padre Island NS)



Photo: NOAA



Photo: NOAA



Photo: NOAA

How does an MPA become part of the national system?

Eligible MPAs can become part of the national system by applying to the National Marine Protected Areas Center through their managing agency. To be eligible for the national system, a site must meet three criteria: (1) fit the definition of an MPA; (2) have a management plan that has clear goals and objectives and calls for monitoring and evaluation of those goals; and (3) contribute to at least one priority conservation objective of the national system as described in the Framework. In addition, cultural heritage MPAs must meet additional cultural heritage requirements.

What are the benefits of joining the national system?

Benefits of joining the system include the opportunity to work with other MPAs in the region and nationally on issues of common conservation concern; greater public and international recognition of MPAs and the resources they protect; and greater opportunities to participate in and influence federal and regional ocean conservation and management initiatives (such as integrated ocean observing systems and highlighting MPA research needs). In addition, the national system provides a venue for coordinated regional planning about place based conservation priorities, as well as an opportunity to engage stakeholders on MPA issues beyond those of a specific site. It will leverage scarce resources toward cross-cutting management needs, and initiate collaborative science and technical projects to support

conservation priorities. Moreover, managing MPAs as a system will improve ecological viability by helping agencies and communities identify potential new sites that enhance connectivity among regional MPAs.

Will joining the national system restrict the management of my protected area?

No. The national system has no authority to restrict or change the management of any MPA. It does not bring tribal, state, territorial or local sites under federal authority. The system will provide technical assistance and help establish partnerships to enhance MPA stewardship.

My protected area spans terrestrial and marine habitats. Why isn't the whole site included within the national system?

MPAs include only the marine portion of a protected area, as defined in the Framework. So the terrestrial part of the protected area is not considered an MPA and is not included within the national system. All figures on MPA area and GIS boundaries include only the marine portion of sites.

Which MPAs are in the national system?

For a complete list of the 437 MPAs in the national system, see: <http://marineprotectedareas.noaa.gov/nationalsystem/nationalsystemlist/>

What is the MPA Center's Role in the National System?

The MPA Center does not manage any MPAs, but supports capacity building, stakeholder engagement, and provides information and tools to MPAs participating in the national system.



Photo: NOAA

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