



# Destination MPA: Marine Protected Areas Support Ocean Recreation in the US

NOAA National Marine Protected Areas Center  
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## The Sea as a Place to Play

Americans are an ocean people, with half of our population living within 100km of the coast. An equal and growing percentage visits the coasts every year to engage in recreational activities in, on, under and next to the ocean. We are drawn to – some might say we return to – the sea for many reasons: enjoying stunningly beautiful seascapes, experiencing vibrant ecosystems inhabited by otherworldly creatures, benefiting from healthy exercise, and regaining a sense of spiritual renewal, community and cultural connections to our maritime past.

While our reasons for treasuring the ocean are varied, they share a common origin. People seek to play, learn and revive in areas where the local ocean areas are healthy, visitor access is facilitated and safe, information is readily available, and compatible human uses are managed sustainably. Marine protected areas (or MPAs for short) are special places that have been protected to ensure that their exceptional ecological, cultural and scenic values are conserved for the future. They're also great places to get away from it all.

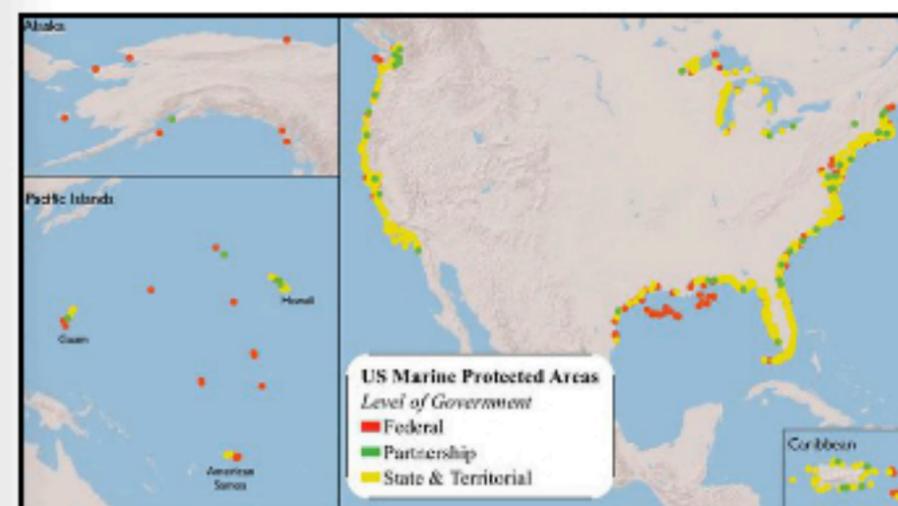


## MPAs: America's Special Ocean Places

Like familiar national parks on land, MPAs have boundaries, conservation goals, and site management programs to ensure their long-term viability and sustainable use for this and future generations. Although creating an MPA sometimes stirs up local controversy, they are nothing new to ocean management in the United States. For over a century, the US has turned to MPAs as a proven conservation tool to protect its most treasured ocean places, with the majority of sites being added in the past three decades. The first MPA, Florida's Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, was created by President Teddy Roosevelt in 1903 to protect birds that were being over-hunted for their plumage. Since then, over 1,700 MPAs of all types now dot our shores and waters, protecting places of ecological, economic and cultural significance in nearly half of our Exclusive Economic Zone.

The coastal and ocean waters around the United States are home to a wide array of MPAs of all sizes, shapes, and purposes. A quick overview of all types of MPAs in U.S. waters reveals that:

- The United States currently has more than 1,700 MPAs
- About 8 percent of all U.S. waters are protected by MPAs focused on natural heritage or cultural heritage (excludes MPAs focused on sustainable production, e.g. fishing)
- Nearly all (85 percent) U.S. MPAs are multiple use, often allowing some form of extractive activities
- About 7 percent of the area in MPAs in the U.S. is no take
- State and territorial governments manage approximately 76 percent of the nation's MPAs
- Federal agencies manage 60% of U.S. MPA area



Managed a variety of federal, state, tribal and local agencies, US MPAs range in size from a few city blocks to nearly half a million square miles of the remote Pacific. They can also differ in their conservation focus and management approach and in the type of protection they offer their natural and cultural resources. In spite of their diversity, all MPAs with a natural and cultural heritage focus share a common goal: to conserve the nation's ocean ecosystems and cultural resources and landscapes in those special places.

## Who Runs These MPAs?

Most federal MPAs are managed by either the National Marine Sanctuary System, under the US Dept. of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), or by the National Parks System or the National Wildlife Refuge System, both under the US Dept. of the Interior. Most coastal states and territories also have their own MPA

programs, with a comparable range of purposes and management approaches. The National Marine Protected Areas Center, a partnership between NOAA and DOI, coordinates the National System of MPAs – a mechanism for all MPA programs to work together on common priorities, share experiences and apply cutting edge information and tools to address management challenges.

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"Destination MPA" Images in order of Appearance:

- Mom and Baby Otter, Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, Cindy Tucey, [www.tuceyphotography.com](http://www.tuceyphotography.com).
- Golden Gate National Recreational Area, Eric DaBreo
- Flamingoes, Everglades National Park, Jose Mirabal
- Keyhole Limpet, Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, Susy Horowitz
- Ruby Beach, Olympic National Park, Alane Haynes
- Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Tyrone Singletary, [alchemistphotography.smugmug.com](http://alchemistphotography.smugmug.com)
- Humpback Whale, Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, Ari Friedlaender, taken under NOAA Fisheries Permit #775-1875
- Shipwreck Lucinda Van Valkenberg, Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, NOAA
- Sport Fishermen, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Amy Massey
- Kayakers, Courtney, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore
- Chumash Tomol, Robert Schwemmer for Channel Islands Chumash



## With all that protection, what can you do in an MPA?

Contrary to common perceptions that all MPAs are “closed to humans,” the vast majority actually allow and encourage a wide, and sometimes surprising, variety of recreational activities within their boundaries. In fact, in most MPAs throughout US waters, you will find people whale watching, SCUBA diving and snorkeling, sport fishing, sailing and motor-boating, tide-pooling, kayaking and paddle boarding, wreck diving, beach going, swimming, observing wetlands from boardwalks, conducting traditional cultural activities and ceremonies, or even (in Florida) participating in underwater rock concerts.



What you won't find, however, in most US MPAs are signs saying “keep out.” That's because most are designed to connect people to nature in ways that sustain both. To that end, many MPAs also provide onsite staff, informative signage, marked access points, onshore facilities, mooring fields, and education and outreach programs designed to enhance visitors' experience and appreciation about the site, its allowed activities, and its valuable and vulnerable resources. The growing value, opportunities and challenges of MPAs as destinations for ocean recreation was underscored in the 2014 “Call to Action” delivered to the US government by the MPA Federal Advisory Committee and endorsed by the National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Councils in 2014.



If you visit an MPA for ocean recreation or other reasons, here are five simple things you can do to help keep it healthy and wild.

1.

**Do Your Homework** – research the local MPAs online and discover what amazing experiences they offer and how to get there.

2.

**Float Lightly** – learn and follow the MPA's rules about what activities are allowed so you can enjoy it and leave it as healthy as you found it.

3.

**Become an MPA Steward** – engage in volunteer activities, like coastal clean-ups or citizen science, at the MPA to help understand and protect the ecosystems it contains.

4.

**Become an MPA Champion** – let your elected officials know you support robust funding for MPAs and the establishment of new MPAs in places that need them.

5.

**Pay It Forward** – while you paddle, float, sail or swim in one of these special ocean places, consider ways to pass that legacy on, unimpaired, to your children's children.