

So What? Marine Protected Areas

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are defined as, “. . . any 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” (mpa.gov - <http://go.usa.gov/fHW>). In other words, MPAs are special places reserved for conservation with varying restrictions. Each MPA is created for a specific purpose with specific management practices: for example, some MPAs do not allow fishing or recreational activities (which is rare in the U.S.), while many others allow all sorts of activities as long as they do not disrupt the main purpose of the MPA.

So why should ocean planners consider MPAs?

1. **Not all MPAs are created equally.** MPAs fall under a variety of classifications. Not only are MPAs created for different reasons and allow different activities, but they are called different names, including MPAs, marine reserves, marine sanctuaries, and marine monuments. The MPA Center (<http://www.mpa.gov/>) provides more information on these types of protected areas as well as a classification system (<http://go.usa.gov/fHZ>) that is based on five criteria: 1) conservation focus; 2) level of protection; 3) permanence of protection; 4) constancy of protection; and 5) ecological scale of protection. Within the downloadable and viewable dataset is a wide variety of information for every site, but in the Marine Cadastre the sites are grouped and symbolized by the level of government responsible for their management (i.e., federal, state, territorial, local, or partnership). The inventory has many other fields that can be used to sort or query specific types of sites, but even with this system and classifications, users still need to investigate each site to find out the specific details on regulations and what activities are allowed, restricted, or prohibited.
2. **MPAs might have seasonal restrictions.** MPAs are created for a variety of reasons, and depending on those reasons, each site has different rules about which activities are allowed within that area. For example, a site that aims to protect a coral reef might limit the specific style or type of fishing allowed, while a site working to protect whales might prohibit shipping lanes from passing through that area while whales are in the vicinity. This means that when planners are working to determine a suitable site for alternative energy, they need to consider where MPAs are located, as well as what activities are allowed within those MPAs.
3. **Society has deemed these areas important.** Many MPAs are created when various stakeholder groups or members of the public propose to their government that a specific site be protected. For example, the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary (TBNMS) was created after residents of the nearby town of Alpena, Michigan, petitioned the state and federal government to protect that area (mpa.gov - <http://go.usa.gov/fHB>). The MPA Center then considers specific MPAs, such as TBNMS, for addition to the U.S. National System of MPAs. The National System of MPAs is a partnership of the nation’s existing MPAs that allows sites to work together toward common conservation objectives. In order for a site to be added to the national system, the proposed site needs to be nominated by its managing agency and then undergo a public comment period where people can state whether they want the site to become a member. The MPA Center reads through the comments and adds sites to the registry that are supported by the public.

Quick Caveats. The dataset shown in MarineCadastre.gov is a data service through the MPA Center. The MPA Center updates the dataset annually to ensure that the most recent data are represented. Although the dataset breaks down the MPAs into five categories, users will still have to seek out further information about what activities are permitted in each area before pursuing planning within that site; each MPA is different and categorical breakdowns do not cover all of these differences. Also, fisheries management areas (FMAs) are not included in this version of the dataset because the many individual areas with a wide variety of allowed activities make for a confusing picture, appearing as though the entire ocean were off-limits.

For a complete version of the dataset and to further explore MPAs and their classifications, please visit the MPA Center Inventory webpage (<http://go.usa.gov/fHk>).

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