

**Momentum to protect the global ocean and to use marine protected areas (MPAs) as a conservation tool is greater than it has ever been, but realizing this potential requires a common, shared language to understand, celebrate and track achievements, and provide clarity about our collective, science-based goals for ocean protection.**

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MPA GUIDE

- Conserving biodiversity in the global ocean through effective protection
- Advancing shared goals by refining shared language

*The MPA Guide* refines existing language and captures a shared vision to describe marine protected areas (MPAs) and the ecological and social outcomes they deliver. It provides a clear, science-based framework to categorize, plan and track MPAs, and to assess their outcomes for both biodiversity and human well-being.

*The Guide* is the work of many hundreds of stakeholders from around the world. It is a timely and important tool to help drive more and better ocean protection, and reflects a collective ambition to find unity in language and consistency in approach.

### THE NEED

MPAs are a vital ocean conservation tool for achieving healthy and resilient marine ecosystems and their multiple benefits to people. They are defined by the IUCN as areas whose primary objective is the conservation of nature<sup>1</sup>. However, there are different interpretations of what the term 'protected' in 'marine protected areas' means, which leads to confusion and undermines MPA effectiveness. In reality, there are many types of MPAs, with a wide range of goals, expectations, and degrees of effectiveness on the water. Some MPAs allow no extraction at all, while others permit almost all types of extraction. Some MPAs are in place 'in the water' with management plans activated, while others exist only on paper. The conservation outcomes from one MPA type will differ from another, and many MPAs are not set up or functioning to achieve their stated goals. This inconsistency can lead to false expectations of the

conservation outcomes that can be expected from any particular MPA, which leads to different conclusions about how much of the ocean is currently 'protected'. Diverging views can obscure real progress and distract attention from the goal of achieving a healthy ocean for the benefit of both people and nature.

Momentum to protect the global ocean and to use MPAs as a conservation tool has never been greater, but realizing this potential will require a common, shared language to understand, celebrate and track achievements, and to provide clarity about our collective, science-based goals.

**HOLISTIC SOLUTIONS THAT CONSIDER PEOPLE AND NATURE are needed so we can use the ocean sustainably and maintain biodiversity and the benefits it provides. Area-based tools – including MPAs, OECMs, and Marine Managed Areas – can help achieve these goals. Parallel actions are also needed to achieve sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, and to reduce carbon emissions and other pollutants including plastics.**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iucn.org/commissions/world-commission-protected-areas/our-work/marine/marine-protected-areas-global-standards-success>

## THE MPA GUIDE

The *MPA Guide* aims to provide this clarity, resolve confusion, and enable informed decision-making. It complements the IUCN Protected Areas categories, which delineate types of Protected Areas by Management Objectives and Governance, but do not categorize explicitly by protection level. Employing both tools will help to provide a complete picture of an MPA. The *Guide* organizes MPAs by activities allowed, clarifies the expected outcomes from different types of MPAs, and describes the enabling conditions for success. The result is an improved understanding of the effective protection required to conserve the global ocean, considering MPA quality as well as quantity.

The *MPA Guide* categorizes MPAs along two axes – (1) Stage of Establishment and (2) Level of Protection – and links these with (3) the key Enabling Conditions for effective protection, and (4) the expected ecological and social Outcomes of each MPA type, to create a useful new framework for analysis.

### 1. Stage of Establishment

The *MPA Guide* recognizes four stages in the multi-step process that is often used by governments or other authorities to establish a new MPA, or reclassify or expand an existing one. The Stages are presented in the temporal sequence most often used but each government or responsible entity will follow its own laws, conventions, or processes.

- a) PROPOSED/COMMITTED:** The intent to create an MPA is made public, for example through a submission to the Convention on Biological Diversity or other instrument, conference announcement, official press release, or other official declaration.
- b) DESIGNATED:** An MPA is established or recognized through legal means or other authoritative rulemaking. The MPA now exists 'on paper' and in law or another formal process.
- c) IMPLEMENTED:** An MPA transitions to being operational and 'in the water' with plans for management. The MPA has a defined boundary, objectives and management strategy for regulating activities, ideally including plans for protecting key habitats and species.
- d) ACTIVELY MANAGED:** The MPA management is ongoing, including monitoring, periodic review, and changes made as needed to achieve biodiversity conservation and other ecological and social goals.

It can take several years from the time a government or other official body makes an initial announcement of intent to create an

MPA until the MPA is actually implemented and managed. This process is not always linear or unidirectional.

Achieving clarity around the Stages of Establishment is important because the official tally of protected areas currently includes MPAs at multiple stages, ranging from those that have recently been announced, to those which offer protection and active management in the water. However, only when an MPA is implemented can the benefits to biodiversity and communities begin to accrue. It is only at this point that an MPA should start 'counting' towards global ocean protection goals such as Aichi Target 11 and UN Sustainable Development Goal 14.5, as well as new targets.

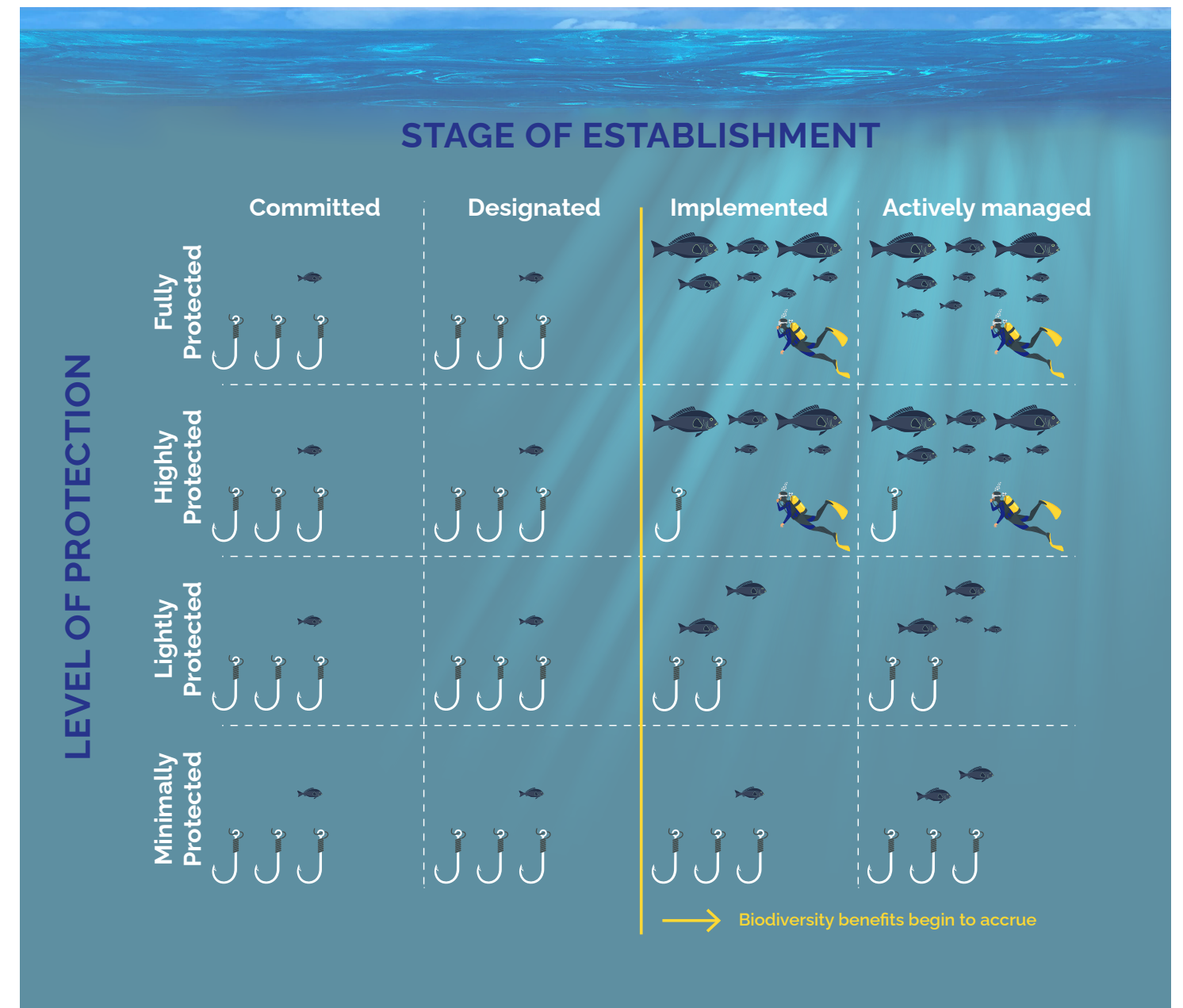
### 2. Level of Protection

'MPA' has become a catch-all term used to describe an immense range of protection levels. Labels that have evolved to distinguish among them are also not globally uniform. For example, the terms 'marine reserves' and 'marine parks' mean different things in different countries. By using terms that can mean different things, we risk obscuring what is really happening and what conservation outcomes can be expected.

Multi-zone MPAs are categorized based on the amount of area and the Level of Protection in their different zones. No value judgement is made for any type of MPA; each is respected for its circumstances and evaluated specifically with biodiversity conservation in mind.

- a) FULLY PROTECTED:** no extractive or destructive activities are allowed, and all abatable impacts are minimized.
- b) HIGHLY PROTECTED:** only light extractive activities are allowed with low total impact, and other abatable impacts are minimized, for example by only allowing low-impact cultural or traditional activities with low levels of extraction.
- c) LIGHTLY PROTECTED:** some protection of biodiversity exists but moderate to significant extraction and other impacts are allowed.
- d) MINIMALLY PROTECTED:** extensive extraction and other impacts are allowed but the site still provides some conservation benefit in the area, as highly destructive activities like industrial fishing are prohibited.

To determine the Level of Protection of an MPA or zone within an MPA, seven different types of activities are considered – mining, dredging, anchoring, infrastructure, aquaculture, fishing and non-extractable activities – and each is evaluated for its intensity, scale, duration and frequency, and overall impact.



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### 3. Enabling Conditions

MPAs cannot achieve their goals unless key Enabling Conditions are in place. The *MPA Guide* identifies the processes, principles, and considerations needed for an MPA to be effectively planned, designed, implemented, and managed to achieve its desired outcomes. Often overlooked, or not explicit, these conditions are essential for lasting MPA success, and should be considered throughout all Stages of Establishment.

Examples of Enabling Conditions include: recognition and support of Indigenous peoples and other local rights-holders, long-term political commitment, clearly defined objectives, sustainable financing, stakeholder engagement, evidence-based decision-making, conflict resolution mechanisms,

good MPA design for connectivity and resilience, and strong mechanisms for compliance and enforcement. Good governance practices, such as inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, are also essential to increase legitimacy, ownership, and overall support for MPAs.

### 4. Outcomes

Once an MPA reaches the 'Implemented' stage, and has the prerequisite Enabling Conditions, it can accrue a host of interrelated outcomes, depending on its Level of Protection. Governments, communities, and stakeholders can use *The MPA Guide* to determine what results they can expect from their MPA.

## Ecological Outcomes

Ecological recovery is more likely, faster, and more complete at the higher Levels of Protection. Strong conservation benefits are expected from Fully and Highly Protected MPAs; few conservation benefits are expected from Minimally Protected areas.

Fully and Highly Protected MPAs are expected to result in greater abundance and size of previously exploited species, restoration of ecological interactions, habitat recovery, enhanced reproductive output of previously exploited species, and greater resilience and stronger potential for adaptation to climate and other environmental changes.

Fully and Highly Protected areas also provide reference areas for evaluating the impacts of extraction outside the MPA, a buffer against accidental mismanagement or environmental changes, and often some enhancement of fisheries outside the MPA.

More heavily impacted areas will normally show a greater ecological response once protection is in place. While some benefits occur quickly following protection, others can take decades.

## Social Outcomes

MPAs can affect many aspects of human well-being, including health, culture, and livelihoods. They may impact many different rights-holders and stakeholders, including Indigenous peoples, fishers (women and men), tourism operators, and coastal residents. Common positive outcomes of MPAs range from enhanced community involvement, to increased catch per unit fishing effort, and higher incomes. Negative outcomes can also occur, most commonly through increased costs of activities, especially fishing, and the emergence of conflicts among stakeholders. More positive outcomes are more likely at higher Levels of Protection, and with key Enabling Conditions in place.

*The MPA Guide* emphasizes that not all MPAs are equal in their ecological or social outcomes due to their Levels of Protection. It provides a template for enhanced clarity and transparency in understanding trade-offs in protection levels, helping to assess true progress toward ocean protection.

*The MPA Guide* provides insight into what effective ocean protection through MPAs looks like by highlighting the far greater ecological and social Outcomes that can be expected in Fully and Highly Protected areas once they are Implemented and Actively Managed, with Enabling Conditions in place.

## IN SUMMARY

MPAs are not a panacea, but they are a powerful and underutilized tool to achieve effective ocean protection if their quality and quantity align with conservation goals. Refining language already in use, the four core components of *The MPA Guide* create a clear framework for discussing, planning, and evaluating MPAs based on:

### Stages of Establishment

A system of four categories to characterize the Stage of Establishment and maintenance of any particular MPA:

- |                       |                     |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Proposed/Committed | 3. Implemented      |
| 2. Designated         | 4. Actively Managed |

### Levels of Protection

A simple method to categorize an MPA into one of four Levels of Protection of its biodiversity:

- |                     |                        |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Fully Protected  | 3. Lightly Protected   |
| 2. Highly Protected | 4. Minimally Protected |

### Enabling Conditions

The necessary conditions that allow an MPA to be effectively planned, designed, implemented, governed, and managed to achieve desired outcomes.

### Outcomes

The ecological and social outcomes that can be reasonably expected for an MPA, based on the Level of Protection it provides.

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**Using the language of *The MPA Guide* can dismantle the roadblocks caused by confusion and inconsistency and help achieve local and global MPA targets and conservation benefits.**

***The Guide* provides a common language, shared understanding, clear definitions, and expected outcomes to bring transparency and clarity to MPA protection.**

**Armed with this clarity and insight, we can accelerate real progress towards the shared goal of protecting the ocean and the people who depend on it, to ensure our ongoing collective survival and prosperity on this planet, our one blue home.**

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For more information about *The MPA Guide*, go to <https://mpaguide-protectedplanet.net> or contact [thempaguide@gmail.com](mailto:thempaguide@gmail.com)