

Definitions and Classification System for U.S. Marine Protected Areas



National Marine Protected Areas Center

Building innovative partnerships and tools to protect the ocean's most important places

Toward a Common Language for Marine Protected Areas

Many nations, including the United States, are establishing marine protected areas (MPAs) to conserve vital marine habitats and resources and help sustain a healthy ocean. Familiar examples of U.S. MPAs include national marine sanctuaries, national parks and wildlife refuges, and many state parks and conservation areas. Over the past several decades, a variety of legal authorities and programs have been established at all levels of government resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of MPAs. Nearly 1,000 such federal and state/territorial sites exist today, covering 26% of U.S. marine waters.

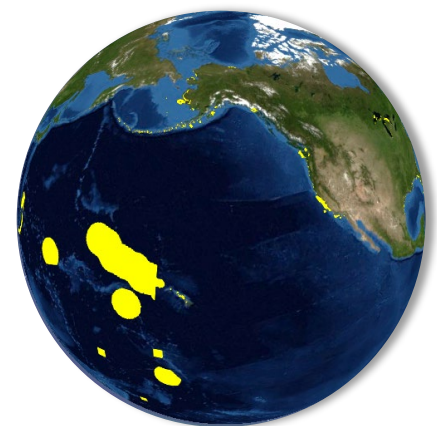
This complex assortment of different MPA types and purposes poses many challenges to policy-makers and stakeholders alike. One key challenge is terminology. Although MPAs have long been used for decades in the U.S. as a conservation and management tool, there is a need for consistent language to accurately describe the many types of MPAs occurring in our waters.

For example, the official programmatic names of many U.S. MPAs (such as sanctuaries, parks, preserves, or natural areas) rarely convey the area's actual conservation purpose, allowable uses, or management approach. Similarly, the term "marine protected area," while a broad umbrella term referring to places designated for long term conservation, is often mistakenly assumed to mean "no-take reserves," where extractive uses are prohibited. In fact, no-take reserves are just one type of MPA. Areas where extractive uses are prohibited or highly restricted have been shown to have stronger conservation outcomes, yet these areas are rare in the United States, occupying only about 3% of U.S. waters. This confusion over MPA terms complicates the critically important national and local dialogues about whether, when, and how to use this promising ecosystem management tool.

In response, the National Marine Protected Areas Center has developed a Classification System that provides agencies and stakeholders with a straightforward means to describe MPAs in purely functional terms using five objective characteristics common to most MPAs:

- Conservation Focus
- Level of Protection
- Permanence of Protection
- Constancy of Protection
- Scale of Protection

For most MPAs in the U.S. and elsewhere, these five functional characteristics provide an accurate picture of why the site was established, what it is intended to protect, how it achieves that protection, and how it may affect local ecosystems and human uses. Combining elements of several domestic and international MPA classification schemes, this approach to describing U.S. MPAs is intended to augment, but not replace, official programmatic names and terms. It is designed to provide a neutral, intuitive, common language with which to describe, understand, and evaluate proposed and existing MPA sites, networks and systems.



MPAs cover 26% of U.S. marine waters.
Data from MPA Inventory 2020.

What is a Marine Protected Area?

The term “marine protected area” encompasses a variety of conservation and management methods. In practice, MPAs are defined areas where natural and/or cultural resources are given greater protection than the surrounding waters. In the U.S., MPAs span a range of habitats including the open ocean, coastal areas, inter-tidal zones, estuaries, and the Great Lakes. They also vary widely in purpose, legal authorities, agencies, management approaches, level of protection, and restrictions on human uses. Some areas that are not MPAs can make important contributions to conservation outcomes, particularly when managed in coordination with a broader MPA network.

The MPA Center uses the definition of a marine protected area from [MPA Executive Order 13158](#): “...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.”

To ensure that MPA reporting is aligned with international definitions, the U.S. also refers to the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#) definition of protected area, “A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.”

Area	<p>Must have legally defined geographical boundaries, and may be of any size, except that the site must be a subset of the U.S. federal, state, local or tribal marine environment in which it is located. Application of this criterion would exclude, for example, generic broad-based resource management authorities without specific locations and areas whose boundaries change over time based on species presence. The area must be one over which the U.S. has jurisdiction, consistent with international law.</p>
Protection	<p>Must be: (a) ocean or coastal waters (note: coastal waters may include intertidal areas, bays or estuaries); (b) an area of the Great Lakes or their connecting waters; (c) an area of submerged lands under ocean or coastal waters or the Great Lakes or their connecting waters; or (d) a combination of the above. The term “intertidal” is understood to mean the shore zone between the mean low water and mean high water marks. An MPA may be a marine component part of a larger site that includes uplands; however, the terrestrial portion is not considered an MPA. For mapping purposes, an MPA may show an associated terrestrial protected area.</p> <p>The term “estuary” is: “part of a river or stream or other body of water having unimpaired connection with the open sea, where the sea water is measurably diluted with fresh water derived from land drainage, and extending upstream to where ocean derived salts measure less than 0.5 parts per thousand during the period of average annual low flow.” This criterion would exclude, for example, strictly freshwater sites outside the Great Lakes region that contain marine species at certain seasons or life history stages unless that site is a component of a larger, multiunit MPA.</p> <p>NOAA will work with individual federal, state and tribal MPAs and programs to examine unique conditions which may affect applicability of the term “estuary” or “coastal waters” for sites that have national or regional significance or representativeness. Estuarine-like sites on tributaries of the Great Lakes will be considered for inclusion if they are located within the eight-digit U.S. Geological Survey cataloging unit adjacent to a Great Lake or its connecting waters.</p>
Reserved	<p>Must be established by and currently subject to federal, state, local, or tribal law or regulation. Application of this criterion would exclude, for example, privately created or maintained marine sites.</p>
Lasting	<p>Site authority must clearly state intent to provide permanent protection. This definition recognizes that subsequent to establishment, MPA designation and level of protection may change for various reasons.</p> <p>Sites and/or protections that must have a specific legislative or other administrative action to be decommissioned shall be considered to have been established with the intent to provide permanent protection. This would include, for example, sites that have a requirement for periodic renewal contingent on evaluation of effectiveness, with no specified expiration date.</p> <p>For all MPAs, the site must provide the same level and type of protection at a fixed location and fixed and regular period of any duration during a year.</p>
Protection	<p>Must have existing laws or regulations that are designed and applied to afford the site with increased protection for part or all of the natural and submerged cultural resources therein for the purpose of maintaining or enhancing the lasting conservation of these resources, beyond any general protections that apply outside the site.</p> <p>Application of this criterion would exclude restricted areas that are established for purposes other than nature conservation or cultural resource protection. The term would not include, for example, areas managed for fisheries (i.e. sustainable production), areas closed for navigational safety, areas closed to safeguard modern human-made structures (e.g., submarine cable no-anchor zones), polluted shellfish-bed closure areas, areas closed to avoid fishing gear conflicts, and areas subject to area-based regulations that are established solely to limit fisheries by quota management or to facilitate enforcement.</p>

User's Guide to the Classification System

The MPA Classification System uses five key functional characteristics to describe any MPA. Taken together, these characteristics influence the site's effects on local ecosystems and human users, and thus its role in contributing to the conservation of healthy marine ecosystems. Among these five site characteristics, the first two – the site's Conservation Focus and its Level of Protection – reflect many of the issues of greatest interest to stakeholders in local, regional, and national MPA dialogues.

Much of the information needed to classify and understand any specific MPA in the U.S. is publicly available through the MPA Center's [MPA Inventory](#), a downloadable geodatabase which contains boundary and classification data for nearly 1,000 individual sites. In addition, the MPA Center's interactive [MPA Mapping Tool](#) allows users to visualize MPA boundaries and provides access to the MPA Inventory data in an interactive web-based mapping environment. Other relevant information can be found in official programmatic documents including management plans, regulations, designation documents, and statutes.

The MPA Classification System can be applied to a single MPA site, or to individual management zones established within a larger MPA site. In a zoned MPA, each zone is classified independently based on its own characteristics and attributes. The overall MPA site then reflects the aggregate characteristics of its component management zones. Four of the five classification characteristics require unique, site-specific selections for the associated attribute options. One (Conservation Focus) allows multiple attribute selections in recognition of the complexity and variety of MPA applications.

1 - Conservation Focus

Effective MPAs should have legally established goals and conservation objectives. Common examples include MPAs created to conserve biodiversity in support of research and education and to protect and interpret shipwrecks for maritime education. These descriptors of an MPA are reflected in the site's Conservation Focus, which represents the characteristics of the area that the MPA was established to conserve. The Conservation Focus, in turn, influences many fundamental aspects of the site, including its design, location, size, scale, management strategies, and potential contribution to surrounding ecosystems. U.S. MPAs generally address one or more of these areas of Conservation Focus:



Photo Matt McIntosh/NOAA

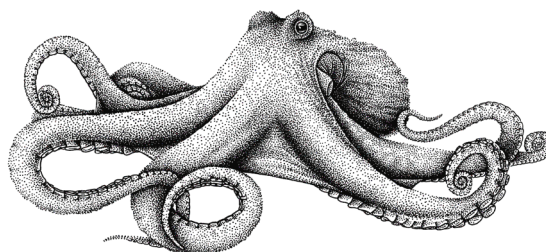
Hawaiian monk seal in Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary



Natural Heritage: MPAs or zones established and managed wholly or in part to sustain, conserve, restore, and understand the protected area's natural biodiversity, populations, communities, habitats, and ecosystems; the ecological and physical processes upon which they depend; and, the ecological services, human uses and values they provide to this and future generations. *Examples: Natural Heritage MPAs include most national marine sanctuaries, national parks, national wildlife refuges, and many state MPAs.*



Cultural Heritage: MPAs or zones established and managed wholly or in part to protect and understand the legacy of physical evidence and intangible attributes of a group or society which is inherited and maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. *Examples: Cultural Heritage MPAs include some national marine sanctuaries, national and state parks, and national historic monuments.*



2 - Level of Protection

MPAs in the U.S. vary widely in the level and type of legal protections afforded to the site's natural and cultural resources and ecological processes. Any MPA, or management zone within a larger MPA, can be characterized by one of the following six levels of protection, which will directly influence its effects on the environment and human uses.



Uniform Multiple-Use: MPAs or zones with a consistent level of protection, allowable activities or restrictions throughout the protected area. Extractive uses may be restricted for natural or cultural resources. *Examples: Uniform multiple-use MPAs are among the most common types in the U.S., and include many sanctuaries, national and state parks, and cultural resource MPAs.*



Zoned Multiple-Use: MPAs that allow some extractive activities throughout the entire site, but that use marine zoning to allocate specific uses to compatible places or times in order to reduce user conflicts and adverse impacts. *Examples: Zoned multiple-use MPAs are increasingly common in U.S. waters including some marine sanctuaries (such as Monterey Bay), national parks, national wildlife refuges, and state MPAs.*



Zoned Multiple-Use With No-Take Area(s): Multiple-use MPAs that contain at least one legally established management zone in which all resource extraction is prohibited. *Examples: Zoned no-take MPAs are emerging gradually in U.S. waters, primarily in some national marine sanctuaries (such as Florida Keys) and national parks (such as Dry Tortugas).*



No-Take: MPAs or zones that allow human access and even some potentially harmful uses, but that prohibit the extraction or significant destruction of natural and cultural resources. This includes Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, which allows very limited subsistence fishing activities by Native Hawaiians by permit. *Examples: No-take MPAs are relatively rare in the U.S., occurring mainly in state MPAs, in some federal areas closed for the protection of endangered species, or as small special use (research) zones within larger multiple-use MPAs. Also called marine reserves or ecological reserves.*



No Impact: MPAs or zones that allow human access, but that prohibit all activities that could harm the site's resources or disrupt the ecological and cultural services they provide. Examples of activities typically prohibited in no-impact MPAs include resource extraction of any kind (fishing, collecting, or mining); discharge of pollutants; disposal or installation of materials; and alteration or disturbance of submerged cultural resources, biological assemblages, ecological interactions, physiochemical environmental features, protected habitats, or the natural processes that support them. *Examples: No-impact MPAs are rare in U.S. waters, occurring mainly as small isolated MPAs or in small research-only zones within larger multiple-use MPAs. Other commonly used terms include fully protected marine (or ecological) reserves.*



No Access: MPAs or zones that restrict all human access in order to prevent potential ecological disturbance, unless specifically permitted for designated special uses such as research, monitoring or restoration. *Examples: No-access MPAs are extremely rare in the U.S., occurring mainly as small research-only zones within larger multiple-use MPAs. Other commonly used terms for no access MPAs include wilderness areas or marine preserves.*



Sunset in Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary.

Photo: Matt McIntosh/NOAA

3 - Permanence of Protection

Not all MPAs are permanently protected. Many sites differ in how long their protections remain in effect, which may in turn profoundly affect their ultimate effects on ecosystems and users.

Permanent: MPAs or zones whose legal authorities provide some level of protection to the site in perpetuity for future generations, unless reversed by unanticipated future legislation or regulatory actions. *Examples: Permanent MPAs include most national marine sanctuaries and all national parks.*

Conditional: MPAs or zones that have the potential, and often the expectation, to persist administratively over time, but whose legal authority has a finite duration and must be actively renewed or ratified based on periodic governmental reviews of performance.

4 - Constancy of Protection

Not all MPAs provide year-round protection to the protected habitat and resources.

Year-Round: MPAs or zones that provide constant protection to the site throughout the year. *Examples: Year-round MPAs include all marine sanctuaries, national parks, refuges, and monuments.*

Seasonal: MPAs or zones that protect specific habitats and resources, but only during fixed seasons or periods when human uses may disrupt ecologically sensitive seasonal processes such as spawning, breeding, or feeding aggregations. *Examples: Seasonal MPAs include some endangered species closures around sensitive habitats.*

5 - Scale of Protection

MPAs in the U.S. vary widely in the ecological scale of the protection they provide. MPA conservation targets range from entire ecosystems and their associated biophysical processes, to focal habitats, species, or other resources deemed to be of economic or ecological importance. The ecological scale of a site's conservation target generally reflects its underlying legal authorities and, in turn, strongly influences the area's design, siting, management approach, and likely effects.

Ecosystem: MPAs or zones whose legal authorities and management measures are intended to protect all of the components and processes of the ecosystem within its boundaries. *Examples: Ecosystem-scale MPAs include most marine sanctuaries, national parks and national monuments.*

Focal Resource: MPAs or zones whose legal authorities and management measures specifically target a particular habitat, species complex, or single resource (either natural or cultural). *Examples: Focal-resource MPAs include many cultural resource sites, including some national marine sanctuaries.*



Photo: Mimi Diorio/NOAA

Intertidal habitat protected in Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.



Photo: Matt McIntosh/NOAA

Coral reef protected in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

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