

PROTECTING AMERICA'S MARINE ENVIRONMENT:

A Report of the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee on Establishing and Managing a National System of Marine Protected Areas

SUMMARY/June 2005



GOAL

The MPA Federal Advisory Committee envisions a National System of Marine Protected Areas implemented:

To enhance effective stewardship, lasting protection, and sustainable use of the nation's natural and cultural marine resources with due consideration of the interests of and implications for all who use and care about our marine environments.

INTRODUCTION

On May 18, 2005, the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee unanimously approved a report containing recommendations on the goal, objectives, guiding principles, structure and process for developing a national system of marine protected areas. The Committee is authorized by Executive Order 13158, and is comprised of 30 members with diverse interests, backgrounds and perspectives, and nine federal ex officio members.

The Committee recommends a National System of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that would achieve the goals described in Executive Order 13158 by supporting regional efforts to enhance the conservation and management of marine resources and providing opportunities for meaningful participation from a wide range of interested and affected parties. The report envisions a National System of MPAs that incorporates regional goals and priorities under a national umbrella. This approach brings coherence to the existing array of MPAs, links existing and new MPAs and enhances the stewardship of our natural and cultural marine resources. The recommendations are consistent with the findings of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, which calls for a movement toward ecosystem-based management to "lead to better decisions that protect the environment while promoting the economy and balancing multiple uses of our oceans and coasts."

The report describes the benefits that a National System of MPAs would provide. These include benefits from restored and protected ecosystems, habitats, biological communities, and cultural resources; as well as the creation of a framework for additional cooperation and coordination, improved efficiency, and greater synergy across MPA sites. This enhanced protection and coordination is particularly important for nearshore coastal waters managed by States and tribes, which provide valuable habitat for a wide range of species and are subject to many competing uses and impacts.



OBJECTIVES

To implement the goal of the National System of Marine Protected Areas, the Committee proposes the following objectives. While some MPAs may have multiple objectives, others may concern a sole objective.

1. Conserving, enhancing, and/or restoring marine biodiversity;
2. Conserving, enhancing, and/or restoring representative examples of the nation's marine habitats, as well as unique biophysical and geological features;
3. Protecting areas vital to the conservation of particular species or species assemblages, such as spawning and nursery grounds, or unique habitats;
4. Providing both appropriate access to and use of marine resources within MPAs consistent with the goals and objectives of the MPA;
5. Protecting cultural resources and providing appropriate access for their enjoyment and sustainable use;
6. Raising awareness and knowledge of marine and coastal resources; and
7. Strengthening existing ocean management frameworks of the United States (i.e., International, Federal, State, territorial, tribal or local laws and regulations).

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The activities of each participating MPA in the National System will include at least one of the following:

- Management programs to conserve ecosystems and biodiversity in general, as well as particular species (e.g., threatened or endangered species and their critical habitats, or commercially and recreationally important species);
- Participation in ecological networks designed to enhance the conservation of species distributed in local populations linked by dispersal or other movement;
- Management programs to provide opportunities for sustainable and non-harmful commercial, recreational, scientific or educational use;
- Management programs to protect unique biophysical and geological features;
- Management programs to protect and provide appropriate access to cultural resources; or
- Participation in administrative linkages to share information and use management resources more efficiently.

DEFINING MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

The report provides definitions of key terms used to describe and define MPAs. In particular, the Committee recommends that MPAs designed for the conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources should be designated for at least 10 years.

The Committee did not develop guidance on a prescriptive definition of the levels of protection or degrees of access and use that should be permitted in a given site. Rather, the Committee agreed that protection measures must be developed by the entity proposing an MPA through a participatory process in accordance with the goals and objectives of the MPA.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The report outlines guiding principles for the creation and management of the National System of MPAs. These include working within existing authorities; establishing national criteria to guide a regional planning process; involving the public at all stages of MPA planning and management; providing incentives for participation; fostering a commitment to compliance; respecting the sovereignty of States, territories, and tribes as well as international commitments; and providing funding and other incentives to accomplish the goal and objectives of the national system.

PROCESS

The report proposes processes at the national and regional levels to implement the national system. At the national level, a coordinating entity would be designated to establish criteria, objectives, guidelines and policies for the National System. At the regional level, existing or new regional entities would conduct a regional planning and implementation process to ensure that the National System reflects regional and national priorities, effectively engages the public, and is coordinated with regional marine management initiatives. The planning process would establish regional marine conservation goals, identify existing MPAs that meet National System criteria and regional goals, and identify gaps where new MPAs may be needed to protect marine resources. Regions were not defined.

NOMINATING SITES

The Committee recommends that the National System be created from both existing and new marine sites meeting the criteria, which could be nominated by any interested party. Nominations would be reviewed by the regional entity and, if approved, forwarded to the national level with relevant information to justify its inclusion in the National System.

IMPLEMENTATION

Actions at the site, regional and national levels will be required to implement the National System of MPAs. Sites accepted into the National System must establish and implement an action plan to define roles and responsibilities, stipulate the goals and objectives for the MPA, and set out performance measures. The regional organization charged with coordinating regional input to the National System, would facilitate managerial coordination among MPAs to achieve economies of scale and ensure consistent approaches to monitoring, enforcement, emergency response, and threat abatement. The national entity charged with coordinating the national system would provide additional funding, other incentives, and formal recognition for MPAs accepted into the National System.

PROMOTING STEWARDSHIP AND EFFECTIVENESS

The Committee emphasizes the importance of individual and collective stewardship to ensure that MPAs accomplish their goals and objectives. Stewardship requires the commitment of all participants whose activities can affect the integrity of an MPA, open communication and a commitment to compliance. The report recommends a combination of a “top down” articulation of national goals and legal mandates balanced with a “bottom up” approach that engages individuals closest to the marine resource or area.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Another overarching principle for a successful National System of MPAs is adaptive management -- a continual process of assessing, evaluating and improving on-going decisions in light of new knowledge and evidence. The science of developing and managing MPAs is relatively new and evolving. Moreover, the ocean environment and the human dimension (changing markets, cultural values, fishing practices, etc.) are highly variable on multiple

scales of time and space. Given this variability, procedures must exist to allow flexibility and learning in the face of new conditions, evidence or understanding. Evaluation of MPA effectiveness is a critical element of adaptive management and must be transparent, have clear criteria, and employ effective communication and public participation.

FUTURE ISSUES

The Committee recommends that the Secretaries of Commerce and the Interior obtain a legal opinion to determine what additional legal authority, if any, would be required or advisable to carry out the Committee's recommendations.

The Committee also identifies several key issues that it did not address or resolve, but believes are important for future consideration.

- Implementation of Section 5 of Executive Order 13158, which requires federal agencies to avoid harm to natural and cultural resources that are protected by an MPA.
- A need to develop a process outlining government-tribal relations to appropriately engage tribes on issues related to the MPA nomination process.
- Clearly designating the appropriate entity to formally recognize designations to the National System.
- Identifying existing or needed monetary and non-monetary incentives to encourage full and effective participation in a national system of MPAs.

The full report is available on www.mpa.gov.



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