

defining MPAs/protecting cold water corals



Marine protected areas are an important tool for managing fisheries and other human activities in the ocean. Hundreds of such areas exist in U.S. waters, ranging from management zones that restrict one specific activity, to a handful of “no take” reserves that prohibit any extractive use of marine resources.

A Presidential Executive Order (EO13158) issued in 2000 directs the U.S. Departments of Commerce and the Interior to develop a scientifically based, comprehensive national system of marine protected areas. The Executive Order defines such areas 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.”

Historically, marine protected areas have been established to meet a number of goals, including conserving biodiversity and habitat, increasing scientific knowledge, providing educational opportunities, enhancing recreational activities and supporting fish populations. Such areas can provide social and economic benefits by facilitating the sustainable recreational and commercial use of marine fisheries. Ecologically connected networks of marine protected areas could amplify the effectiveness and conservation benefits of each individual area in the network.



key concepts and controversies

Cold Water Corals



Some advocates of marine protected areas fear that current efforts to identify and protect vulnerable habitats are proceeding too slowly, particularly for cold water coral and sponge communities. Recent scientific exploration of communities of corals in deep, cooler waters off the United States has increased focus on protections for these relatively unknown ecosystems. A bill introduced in the last Congress, the Deep Sea Coral Protection Act, would protect cold water corals and sponges in federally managed waters from damage by mobile bottom-tending fishing gear through a number of provisions.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Commerce was petitioned for rulemaking to protect cold water coral and sponge habitats. The petition seeks a regulatory program that includes: increased mapping of areas containing cold water coral and sponge habitat; identification and description of such areas as both essential fish habitat and habitat areas of particular concern; increased protective measures for these habitats, including additional fishing closure areas, enforcement and penalties; an enhanced infrastructure to monitor cold water corals and sponges; and increased funding for further research to identify, protect, and restore damaged cold water coral and sponge habitats. NOAA Fisheries Service has solicited public comment on the petition but has not yet issued a response.

Key Issues

The most critical issues to be resolved to facilitate the expanded use of marine protected areas for cold water corals and other sensitive habitats are:

- The role of the fishery management councils in developing marine protected areas
- Overlapping jurisdiction and management authorities
- Incomplete mapping of sea floor habitat
- Unclear legal authority for protecting cold water corals (apart from their role as fish habitat)
- Lack of comprehensive planning to identify conservation goals for marine protected areas

Recent Efforts

Fishery management councils have been taking steps to protect cold water corals and sponges. Most recently, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council agreed to close 280,000 square miles of coastline along the Aleutian Islands to vessels using mobile bottom-tending gear and other commercial fishing gear to protect fragile seafloor habitat.





story ideas

In fall 2004, the New England Council supported the closure of two offshore canyons located southeast of Nantucket to protect cold water corals from potentially damaging effects of vessels targeting monkfish in the area. Several years earlier, the South Atlantic Council restricted the use of fishing gear in an area containing a rare species of coral found off the east coast of central Florida.

The 2004 U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy report made recommendations for improving the use of marine protected areas with better coordination and integration of the existing network of marine managed areas.

The Bush Administration's Ocean Action Plan, released this year, calls for:

- Better coordination and integration of the existing marine managed areas
- Adoption of an ocean parks policy
- Forming a committee on ocean policy to determine which agency or agencies will coordinate federal management and research on cold water corals
- Fishery management councils to take action, where appropriate, to protect cold water corals in their fishery management plans

What network of marine protected areas is already in place? What are the potential benefits of an effective national system of marine protected areas?

What have we learned from the history of marine protected areas in the U.S.?

Have there been proven effects of marine protected areas? Where have we seen success?

Where is cold water coral research on-going in the U.S.— what cold water coral areas are known, and what areas have not yet been explored?

What advances in technology have opened up the ocean floor to recent explorations? What is the cost of scientific sea-floor explorations? How much of the sea floor is mapped in detail?

What are the most interesting creatures found in cold water coral areas?

How much is known scientifically about the relationship between the ocean floor and commercial fisheries?



information

conference participants MPA/cold water corals workshop

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useful websites

U.S. Department of Commerce/NOAA and the U.S. Department of the Interior MPA site

<http://mpa.gov/>

Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

www.pcffa.org/MPA.htm

Environmental Defense

[www.environmentaldefense.org/system/
templates/page/issue.cfm?subnav=3:](http://www.environmentaldefense.org/system/templates/page/issue.cfm?subnav=3)