

"Learning by Doing," Canada Adds Pilot MPAs and Looks Long-Term to Zone National Waters

Building an ambitious national MPA program from the ground up, Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) has established six "pilot MPAs" in the past year and has plans for more soon. With an adaptive approach that emphasizes scientific research and the testing of protection strategies, DFO seeks to "learn by doing": through its pilots, it will determine whether the areas should be formally designated as MPAs and how they can best be managed, say officials.

DFO assumed responsibility for coordinating the nation's marine protected area programs in 1997 with the launch of Canada's Oceans Act, and it has moved quickly since then to set aside coastal and deepwater sites. Four pilot MPAs now exist on the West Coast (Race Rocks, Gabriola Passage, Endeavor Hot Vents, and Bowie Seamount) and two off the Maritimes on the East Coast (Basin Head and Sable Gully). Of these six, Basin Head is the newest, announced in June. DFO officials in Newfoundland, Quebec, and Canada's Arctic are expected to announce pilot MPAs in their respective areas in the coming year or two. Draft management plans for the existing pilot MPAs could be ready by early next year.

But despite the swiftness with which the government is naming pilot MPAs, what may be most remarkable about its effort is its long-term goal: to use MPAs as one element in the creation of integrated zoning plans for much of Canada's marine environment.

Integrated Management

The Oceans Act established a national framework for the identification and management of MPAs, and each regional office of DFO is charged with refining that framework to suit local marine conservation and protection needs. As a result, each region has pursued its MPA efforts differently, involving provincial government officials to various degrees. The British Columbian provincial government, for example, has helped spearhead the West Coast efforts, having initiated plans to develop a network of West Coast MPAs in the early 1990s, predating the Oceans Act.

The regions have adopted similar tactics, however, in soliciting the involvement of community-level groups and individuals in the planning of the MPAs. Integrated management is the buzzword in DFO's efforts, not only for naming future pilot areas but for the long-term goal of ocean zoning as well.

While the West Coast's four pilots arose mostly from pre-existing government interest in protecting those sites, MPA Manager Julie Barr of the West Coast DFO said future MPAs would rely much more on community input. "Pilot MPAs will be created in a formalized way with a wide range of stakeholders discussing zoning," she said, adding that DFO is placing its faith in the integrated management process. "We don't know yet what the end products of an integrated management process will be, but it is anticipated that MPAs will be one outcome. DFO's role will be to present the best information that it can, and to be involved in the negotiation process as much as anyone else." Each pilot MPA will have its own stakeholder group.

Future of Canada's Marine Planning

In the Maritime provinces, community liaison staffers have been presenting the Oceans Act's objectives and programs to local groups. "By working at the community level, [the ideas for] additional sites are starting to come forward which may be of interest to the MPA program in the future," said DFO's Derek Fenton.

In what will likely serve as a benchmark for the rest of Canada's offshore area, DFO's Maritimes region last December began directing a project to develop an integrated management plan for all activities on the entire Eastern Scotian Shelf, of which the Sable Gully pilot MPA is a part. The Scotian Shelf features great biological diversity and multiple ocean uses, including oil and gas drilling, fisheries, shipping, tourism, and scientific research. All stakeholder groups will be involved in the development of common objectives and goals. The management plan is not expected to be completed for several years, but already points the way for the rest of the nation in terms of marine zoning.

The West Coast DFO's Barr said her region anticipates creating a similar integrated plan for its whole marine area. "We're

really looking at creating an entire water use plan, of which MPAs will be one part," she said.

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Marine Protected Areas Under the Oceans Act

Under the Oceans Act, Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans has become the newest partner in the nation's marine protected area efforts. Parks Canada and Environment Canada have developed programs to protect those aspects of the marine environment that fall within their mandates. For more information:

Parks Canada web site: parks canada.pch.gc.ca/nmca/nmp_e.htm

Environment Canada (Canadian Wildlife Service) web site: www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/www-fap/nwambs/nwambs.html

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