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MPA Update: Race Rocks to Become Canada's First Official MPA

On September 14, Canada's minister of fisheries and oceans endorsed a plan that will make the waters surrounding Race Rocks, a small nine-islet archipelago, the first official marine protected area in Canada. Commercial fishing and most sport fishing will be off-limits in the MPA, which will measure a little less than one square mile, or 2.6 sq. km, in area. Race Rocks is located on the southernmost end of the nation's Pacific coast ([MPA News 1:8](#)).

Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) designated Race Rocks in 1998 as one of several "pilot MPAs", part of a strategy to determine whether those areas should be formally designated as MPAs and how they could best be managed ([MPA News 1:1](#)).

Now that it has received the minister's endorsement as an MPA, Race Rocks will undergo a regulatory process to formalize the MPA designation; the process is expected to conclude within a few months. Although Race Rocks will be the first Canadian site to receive the title of "marine protected area" under the nation's Oceans Act, there already exist several protected areas in Canadian waters managed by other agencies. These include two "national marine conservation areas" managed by Parks Canada, and several coastal "national wildlife areas" and "marine wildlife areas" managed by Environment Canada. Together, the three agencies play complementary roles in protecting Canada's offshore and coastal systems.

Integrated management

In 1980, the province of British Columbia recognized the biodiversity of the Race Rocks area by designating it as an ecological reserve under provincial management. This authority has provided for the protection of the nine islets and the ocean bottom to a depth of 20 fathoms, but the province has lacked jurisdiction over the water column.

The MPA designation by DFO will allow for integration of federal (water column) and provincial (terrestrial and seabed) initiatives. Canada's Oceans Act, launched in 1997, provides for DFO to develop integrated management plans with other federal agencies, provincial governments, aboriginal organizations, and coastal communities for the conservation and protection of Canada's oceans.

In 1999, officials from DFO and the British Columbia provincial parks agency (BC Parks) established an advisory board to represent stakeholder groups in the pilot MPA process and make consensus-based recommendations to federal and provincial regulators. The board included representatives from federal and provincial agencies, aboriginal groups, the Department of National Defense, the scientific community, the diving and sport fishing communities, NGOs, and others. It was this advisory board that recommended that Race Rocks' status be changed from pilot to full MPA, a plan that the minister endorsed last month.

Overall management of the MPA and ecological reserve will be achieved through a combination of regulatory actions and voluntary compliance guidelines for a number of activities and issues, such as recreational boating, diving practices, whale watching, education, and research. Monitoring and assessment of the guidelines' effectiveness will occur over a two-year period. Depending on the results, activity regulations may then be considered if necessary.

Named for its strong tidal currents and rocky reefs, Race Rocks features a wide array of Pacific marine wildlife, including whales, sea lions, seals, birds, Northern abalone, and kelp forests. Race Rocks is located 17 kilometers southwest of the city of Victoria.

Canada's remaining pilot MPAs on the Pacific coast are Gabriola Passage, Endeavour Hot Vents, and Bowie Seamount. Off the Maritimes on the Atlantic coast, there are two pilot MPAs, at Basin Head and Sable Gully.

The Race Rocks website is at <http://www.racerocks.com>.

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