

President Clinton Calls for Representative Network of MPAs in US Waters

In response to calls from conservationists and scientists, President Clinton has ordered US federal agencies to establish a comprehensive national network of marine protected areas throughout US marine waters. Executive Order #13158, delivered May 26, calls for expansion of the nation's MPA system to include examples of all types of US marine ecosystems.

Clinton's action represents the first official US directive to coordinate the nation's unsystematic array of MPA-related initiatives. The Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) -- which oversees the US National Marine Sanctuaries, among other MPAs -- will be in charge of developing a single framework to manage the national system. The framework will be intended to support, rather than limit, agencies' independent exercise of their existing authorities.

To set the framework, NOAA will team with the Department of the Interior, which oversees National Parks and National Wildlife Refuges. Following Clinton's announcement, NOAA Administrator James Baker remarked that the order will improve the US' current fragmented MPA system. "We don't have a master plan that says, 'This is how this all fits together scientifically,'" he said. "That's what we're trying to put together here."

Directions to authorities

The executive order directs each federal agency with authority to establish or manage MPAs to "enhance and expand protection of existing MPAs and to establish and recommend new MPAs." To achieve this, the order calls for each agency, as appropriate, to incorporate:

- science-based identification and prioritization of natural and cultural resources
- integrated assessments of ecological linkages among MPAs
- biological assessment of the minimum area for which a ban on consumptive uses would be necessary to preserve representative habitats
- assessments of protection gaps and threats
- identification of user conflicts affecting MPAs and possible solutions, with the economic effects of these solutions
- identification of opportunities to improve linkages with, and technical assistance to, international MPA programs.

In carrying out the requirements of this section, the departments of Commerce and the Interior will seek the advice of non-federal scientists, resource managers, and other interested persons and organizations through an MPA-related federal advisory committee, to be established by the Department of Commerce.

The order also calls on the US Environmental Protection Agency to propose new science-based regulations, as necessary, to ensure appropriate levels of protection for the marine environment.

Inspired by a letter

According to officials involved in its drafting, the executive order was inspired by a letter from scientists and conservationists to Clinton in February. Spearheaded by the Marine Conservation Biology Institute (MCBI), a US-based NGO, the letter urged Clinton to create a permanent interagency council to set standards and seek opportunities for the establishment of MPAs in the country ([MPA News 1:4](#)). Officials from Commerce and the Interior worked with MCBI on some details of the executive order.

MCBI's call for an interagency council has been matched by Clinton's directive to NOAA to create a "Marine Protected Area Center." In cooperation with the Department of the Interior, the center will develop a framework for a national MPA system and provide federal, state, local and other governments with a clearinghouse of information, technologies, and strategies to support the system. The secretaries of Commerce and the Interior will also jointly manage a website with information on MPAs.

Drafters of the executive order, however, did not adopt MCBi's recommendation that the US set aside 20% of each ecosystem type as no-take reserves by 2015. "We felt we needed to do a scientific assessment first to come up with a target," said co-drafter Stephen Saunders, assistant deputy secretary for fish and wildlife and parks in the Department of the Interior. Earlier this year, the US Coral Reef Task Force called for setting aside 20% of US coral reef habitats ([MPA News 1:4](#)).

MCBI Director Elliott Norse said that even without the 20% target, the executive order represented a significant step forward. "Fifty years from now, I believe that this will be considered the biggest environmental legacy of the Clinton administration, and the most important step taken so far in US marine conservation," he said.

NW Hawaiian Islands singled out

In a separate move timed to coincide with his executive order, Clinton directed the secretaries of Commerce and the Interior to develop a plan in 90 days to permanently protect the coral reefs of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, which represent more than 60% of coral reefs in US waters. The plan is to be drawn with the input of state representatives and fishery managers.

Located west of the main Hawaiian Islands, the northwest chain consists of eight islands, stretching over 1,200 miles (1,931 km). The reefs extend from nearshore areas just beneath the surface to a depth of 100 fathoms (600 ft./183 m).

The islands' reefs are not heavily fished. The most significant commercial activity involves a rock lobster fishery that fishery managers have limited to harvesting 13% of the exploitable population. There is some bottom-fishing in the area by a small fleet, although it doesn't occur on the reefs. The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, which oversees fishing in the region and reports to NOAA, proposed a plan this year to ban all fishing in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands from 0-10 fathoms (0-18 m). Furthermore, the council proposed to ban all fishing from 0-50 fathoms (0-91 m) around islands with significant populations of endangered Hawaiian monk seals.

Saunders, who helped craft Clinton's Northwest Hawaiian Islands directive, said that although the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council is moving forward, its authority is limited to controlling the impacts of fishing. Other impacts on reefs -- including from the anchoring of non-fishing boats -- still needs to be guarded against. "There is a risk [to the Northwest Hawaiian Islands' reefs] in terms of things that could happen in the future," said Saunders, listing climate change and tourism growth as having impacts in coming years. "Our intent is to get out there ahead of time to protect the reefs."

Kitty Simonds, executive director of the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, is nonetheless concerned about the aim of the directive. "I'm sure there will be a recommendation [made during the 90-day review process] to make the Northwest Hawaiian Islands a no-take area, even though these are healthy fisheries," she said. "Fishing is our culture, our livelihood. Why shut the fisheries down if there are no threats?"

For more information:

Stephen Saunders, Department of the Interior, 1849 C St. NW, Room 3159, Washington, DC 20040, USA. Tel: +1 202 208 4416; E-mail: stephen_saunders@ios.doi.gov.

Amy Matthew-Amos, Marine Conservation Biology Institute, 1725 K St. NW, Suite 212, Washington, DC 20006, USA. Tel: +1 202 887 4960; E-mail: amy@mcbi.org.

Kitty Simonds, Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, 1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813, USA. Tel: +1 808 522 8220; E-mail: kitty.simonds@noaa.gov.

Text of Executive Order

The text of President Clinton's Executive Order #13158 is available online at:

<http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/uri-res/12R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/2000/5/26/24.text.2>

US Defines "MPA"

Until last month, the US had no official definition for "marine protected area." Now, under President Clinton's executive order, the US has set a definition for MPA that closely mirrors the definition offered by the IUCN, or World Conservation Union, in 1992 ([MPA News 1:4](#)).

According to the Executive Order, marine protected area means "any area of the marine environment that has been reserved by federal, state, territorial, tribal, or local laws or has regulations to provide lasting protection for part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein."

The Secretaries of Commerce and the Interior will share responsibility for cataloging all areas in the US that fit the above definition of marine protected area. Depending on interpretation of this definition, the catalog could list thousands of MPAs already designated by all levels of government in the US.

Resolution Adopted for North American MPA Network

Attendees of the Fourth International Conference on the Science and Management of Protected Areas (SAMPAs), held 15-19 May in Waterloo, Ontario (Canada), adopted a resolution calling for creation of a representative network of MPAs throughout the marine waters of North America.

The resolution -- citing the need for an "integrated, effective, and fully representative system of marine protected areas, to be established by the year 2010" -- was adopted by the assembly of scientists, protected-area managers, and conservation advocates. The conference also adopted a resolution calling on Canada to conduct an assessment of the Canadian marine environment and current means for protecting it.

For more information:

Martin Willison, School for Resource and Environmental Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 3J5, Canada. Tel: +1 902 494 2966; E-mail: willison@is.dal.ca.

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