

Global Ocean Protection:
What we have and what we need

By Dr. Enric Sala

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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Marine protected areas are key to the health of the ocean. Nowhere I have seen their power better than at Cabo Pulmo in Mexico. When I first dived there in 1999, the place was an underwater desert. The fishermen were so upset with not having enough fish to catch, that they decided to stop fishing. Completely. They created a national park in the sea. When I returned 10 years later, *this* is what I saw. The fish came back spectacularly, and now that place is hailed as the greatest success of ocean conservation in Mexico.

The good news is that we have seen a dramatic increase in the total surface in marine protected areas (MPAs) around the world, especially in the last decade. And since the first Our Ocean conference in 2014, we have doubled the total area in MPAs.

But the bad news is that today, only 3% of the ocean is in MPAs that have been implemented. There are MPAs that have been announced or designated but not implemented yet, and countries have also proposed or committed to new MPAs in the future. But these areas don't count as protected because they don't exist yet. Some international organizations assume that 6% of the ocean is now protected, but the facts clearly show that only 3% is in MPAs. Moreover, of this 3%, only half of that, that is, 1.5% of the ocean is in no-take areas that prohibit fishing and other extraction of marine resources.

There is abundant evidence that fully protected marine reserves are the most effective type of protected area for restoring and protecting marine biodiversity. Marine reserves, on average, increase fish biomass by over 600% relative to unprotected areas nearby. In contrast, MPAs that allow fishing typically do not even double fish biomass compared to unprotected areas.

No-take areas produce many more benefits. Fish and lobster and other animals in no-take marine reserves grow and reproduce much more, and many of those animals spill over the boundaries, helping local fishermen to increase their catches. In the coast of Kenya, fishermen's profits doubled thanks to a marine reserve in only 3 years.

And that's not all: when the fish come back, the divers come in, like in the Medes Islands Marine Reserve in the coast of Catalonia, not far from here, where a single km² of reserve brings in 12 million Euros to the local economy through ecotourism every year.

Marine reserves may also suffer to the effects of climate change, but evidence to date indicates that reserves with larger animals tend to be more resilient than unprotected areas. That means they are more likely to bounce back after warming events.

Partially-protected MPAs are useful for managing use conflicts, helping to restore the abundance of some commercial species by banning specific fishing gears, and preventing habitat destruction by banning bottom trawling. These areas should be called "marine managed areas" since they help manage fishing better, but they do not allow for full ecosystem recovery. Calling "protected" an area that allows fishing is like calling a logging concession a "protected forest". Areas where fishing is allowed should not count as "protected."

The target of the United Nations is 10% of the global ocean protected by 2020. At 3% of the ocean protected today, we're still far from that target.

Therefore, no-take areas should be the protected areas of choice to achieve the United Nations' targets for global ocean protection. And this is just a milestone. Many scientific studies suggest that at least 30% of the ocean should be protected to achieve a number of conservation and productivity goals. And we need to manage fishing much better in the rest of the ocean, which is another huge task.

Can we do this? The answer is yes, and some countries have already shown the way. Palau committed to 80% of their waters to be fully protected by 2020. Chile will soon have 30% of their waters in no-take areas. Niue and other countries are also going to make big announcements in this conference. And these are all fishing countries. And there are more.

If you want to know more details about what type of protection really counts, I hope that you have signed up for a breakfast side event tomorrow morning, where a science panel will debate these issues in depth.

The science and the economics are clear: fully or strongly protected areas are the most effective MPAs in the ocean, and they are the only areas that should count towards our global ocean conservation targets.

Finally, the National Geographic Society has created a new Conservation Leadership Award for country leaders who have done an extraordinary achievement in ocean conservation, and we will give the inaugural award in June 2018 at our Explorers Festival in Washington, DC. We hope that there will be strong competition among leaders to win that recognition.

Thank you very much.