

Important marine area initiatives and ways forward together

3rd February 2023, The Nest, Vancouver CA

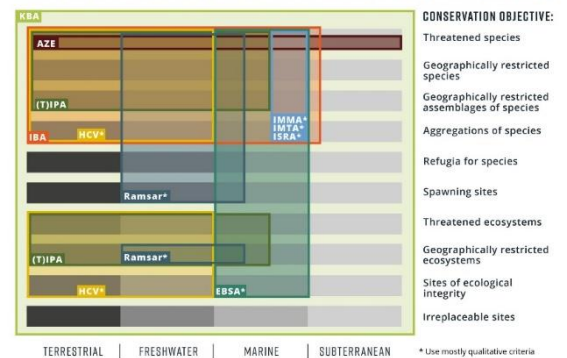
This report is an overview summary of the workshop on important marine area initiatives and ways forward together, convened by BirdLife International in Vancouver on the 3rd February 2023.

Introduction

There are multiple initiatives to identify important areas for various marine taxa (hereafter these various approaches are collectively referred to *important marine areas*). Each taxa group has developed a robust approach for defining criteria and identifying important marine areas, and all sites provide valuable information.

As we work towards achieving global targets of 30% protection of marine areas by 2030, important marine areas provide an essential input to achieving this Target. To ensure important marine areas are appropriately considered in policy considerations and decision-making processes we will need to work together and ensure consistency in our messaging. This workshop, convened by BirdLife International, provided an opportunity to bring together those working on important marine areas and to discuss opportunities to work together. An overview of the various single and multi-taxa initiatives and platforms was provided, including: [Key Biodiversity Areas](#) & [Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas](#); [Important Marine Mammal Areas](#); [Important Shark and Ray Areas](#); [Important Marine Turtle Areas](#); [Ecologically and Biologically Significant marine Areas](#); and the [Migratory Connectivity in the Ocean](#) system.

IDENTIFYING AREAS OF IMPORTANCE FOR BIODIVERSITY



Similarities and nuances in approaches

There are similarities in the different important marine area approaches, and congruence between criteria; all the approaches are robust and orientated toward identifying a network of sites that are important for species persistence, and that can inform conservation action. The benefits of the nuances in the different taxa approaches were discussed to be the ability to:

- **Accommodate the data nuances for different taxa:** account for the biological needs of a species/taxon, and how to manage the data availability and complexity, including application of an appropriate threshold (quantitative or qualitative).
- **Mobilize a network:** facilitate bringing together relevant experts (who tend to be species/taxa/region-focused), and also mobilizing access to data; simplifies reaching agreement during the process, and creates a network of people working towards a common goal.
- **Facilitate communication:** shared similarities in ecology/threat facilitate communicating a clear story and also easier to target certain audience/specialists; easier to tell clear stories if focusing on one group.

The workshop noted that there is a spectrum of certainty of what an area means at different scales (e.g., species, population, ecosystem).

- **Proposed output: Policy brief / paper on the different approaches, including criteria comparison,** figure on data process and uncertainty of site and scale (manageability); explore pros and cons of aggregating area-based initiatives.

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Ensuring Important Marine Areas are used in Marine Spatial Planning

Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) is an integrated, place-based approach for allocating marine resources and space, while protecting the ecosystems that provide these. It can be undertaken at any scale, but is most commonly used within MPAs, to design networks of MPAs, within state and national waters, or (rarely) in transboundary regions. MSP tends to be based on economic growth, as opposed to systematic conservation planning, and conservation tends to be a small voice at this table with industry. To ensure important marine areas are heard in this context, there needs to be clear communication on the benefits to countries, industries, and people.

Important marine areas can be seen as a variety of inputs to MSP processes, including as data layers and tools for visioning different scenarios, a way to direct funding, or as a foci for management. To be fully used in MSP, important marine areas will need to be used alongside information on species vulnerability and occurrence/likelihood of pressures within a site.

However, from this it was concluded that there are two separate processes that have different scientific and communication needs:

1. **Identification of important marine areas:** describes the scientific value of a sites, and communication is needed to promote the value of the site for the species/population.
 - a. Empower those involved in national/regional identification becoming champions and communicators about the sites.
 - b. Amalgamate: where possible, tell the multi-taxa story, and show coherence in messaging across initiatives.
 - c. Look for opportunities to delineate sites together (cooperate/communicate where there are e.g., existing sites to ensure boundary congruence where possible).
2. **Implementation of site information: information on pressures is needed to inform management actions at the site:**
 - a. Translation of the site-based information to a decision maker or regulatory body. This may need to be done on a region-by-region basis, and also tailored to language for specific regulatory body.
 - b. Note that knowledge gaps on sensitivity to certain pressures for some taxa is a challenge.
 - **Suggested opportunity: Pressure-based assessment (identify common threats to multiple taxa/sites / high seas), targeted by pressure appropriate to regulatory bodies (e.g., shipping and IMO).**
 - **Suggested opportunity: Horizon scan of new and emerging threats to focal marine taxa / regions**

On-going policy processes

The workshop heard from representatives on three relevant policy mechanisms and the potential opportunity to promote important marine areas:

- The international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ Treaty);
- The Convention on Biological Diversity Global Biodiversity Framework;
- The Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR).

Discussions focused on messaging, identifying champions, and identifying opportunity within processes we're already engaging in. The workshop noted that there are existing platforms that

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facilitate the important marine areas data being used by decision makers, e.g., the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT), and we could use this to further channel information to financial agencies. It was noted that compiling the relevant information and then promoting it until it is acted upon is a huge undertaking and can be a time-consuming process, that almost always requires long-term funding.

Key conclusions from discussions were:

- **Timing:** we need to know or identify the most impactful time to get involved or submit ideas into the process, and because policy processes can take a long time we need to have the (shared) resources to follow the appropriate process for the duration.
- **Opportunity:** can we identify strategic wins to further promote the Important Marine Areas data? Suggestions included looking to current sites with a lot of attention (e.g., Costa Rica thermal dome, Sargasso Sea); identifying country champions for important marine areas within policy processes to take the promotion of important marine areas forward; aligning to existing or planned indicators within policy frameworks to drive intervention and monitoring.
- **Messaging:** we need to consider how can we harmonise our messaging to better market to decision makers. This could include simplifying the messaging (not the science) and directing to political relevance, e.g., climate agenda, 30x30, restoration etc.
- **Relationships:** we need to identify who our targets are for decision making, how we engage/interact with them, and what information they need; recognising that building and establishing these relationships and understanding personalities is essential for engagement to be effective. We noted that we have many people at the negotiating table via our existing networks and that we could look to leverage this existing capacity to move Important Marine Areas forward.
- **Suggested opportunity: Stakeholder mapping of our collaborative networks / known champions** (national / regional / regulatory)
- **Suggested opportunity: Horizon scan of timing/opportunity within policy processes**
 - **Combine above stakeholder and opportunity mapping to identify strategic wins**

Next steps - Ways of working together going forward

The workshop agreed that a combination of an email list and zoom call would be the most satisfactory approach for communicating as a group going forward. Challenges of different time zones, and already full inboxes were noted. We proposed streamlining communication as automated monthly (or other) reminders that people can contribute to, e.g., mailing list, and/ quarterly zoom calls.

The workshop also discussed an umbrella term across initiatives “*important marine areas partnership*” that could be a useful banner for funding and harmonising messaging going forward.

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