



International Marine Conservation Congress Cape Town, October 2024

Workshop report: “IUCN WCPA policy guidance on fishing in MPAs”

Background

MPAs and MPA networks are vital area-based conservation measures for marine biodiversity. The *IUCN Guidelines for applying the IUCN protected area management categories to marine protected areas* (IUCN, [2019](#)) points out that there is a “continuum” of MPAs from “fully protected areas with no take, through to multiple use areas”. There is general consensus that any fishing or other extractive activities permitted within such areas must have low ecological impact, be sustainable, benefit local communities and be well managed as part of an integrated approach to management. WCPA’s current guidance attempts to encapsulate this but, to date, has not been widely or consistently used.

Now that countries are starting to report on the effective management and equitable governance of their protected areas to the Convention on Biological Diversity, under Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, further thought is required on how, when and where fisheries can be managed within MPAs and MPA networks to ensure conservation outcomes.

The intention of the workshop was therefore to initiate a process that would lead to updating and revision, as necessary, of WCPA policy and guidance on fishing and MPAs/MPA networks, for publication by the World Conservation Congress, October 2025. The 28 participants from 11 countries included representatives from NGOs, academia, government, indigenous communities, and private consultancies (see Annex). Given financial and time constraints, participants were individuals who were attending IMCC7 in their own capacity; about half were specifically invited, and others attended because of specific interest. The focus of the workshop was on MPAs, but it was recognized by participants that much of the discussion was also relevant to OECMs, and that any future guidance would need to take account of guidance being produced for OECMs.

Objectives of workshop

These were to:

1. Improve understanding of the use of the IUCN protected area management categories (I-VI) for MPAs, the current guidance on how fishing is expected to be managed in each category; and the relationship of the [MPA Guide](#) with this guidance;
2. Identify key uncertainties when applying the current WCPA guidance on fishing in MPAs, including identifying gaps in evidence, and recommendations for revision and updating of the guidance.
3. If appropriate, recommend the establishment of a WCPA Marine Task Force on fisheries and MPAs to take the process of updating the WCPA guidance forward.

Workshop programme and participants

Introduction

The workshop opened with two short presentations introducing the topic:

1. Sue Wells (WCPA Marine) gave a brief overview of the past and current IUCN WCPA guidance on MPAs and fishing, and the IUCN protected area management categories. She explained that the MPA guidance needs updating on account of:
 - i. IUCN WCC Resolutions relating to fishing and marine biodiversity conservation, in particular two 2020 WCC resolutions: [Res. 55 - Guidance to identify industrial fishing incompatible with protected areas](#); and [Res. 83 - Ensuring the compatibility of human activities with conservation objectives in protected areas](#).
 - ii. New initiatives relating to fisheries and MPAs, in particular the report on *Reducing the impact of fisheries on marine biodiversity* that is being produced in response to WCC Res 2020/107, and the [IUCN Green List Standard](#), which is no longer new, but needs to revisit the indicators for MPAs that relate to threats and conservation outcomes.
 - iii. New and forthcoming guidance on fishing and area-based conservation measures, including the FAO guidance on fisheries and OECMs, currently in preparation, and the [IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management \(CEM\)/Fisheries Expert Group Task Force 2023 on fisheries and area-based management](#).
 - iv. Peer-reviewed papers on fishing and its impacts on biodiversity that have been published since the current WCPA guidance was issued.
2. Fabrice Stephenson (WCPA Marine Co Vice Chair, Newcastle University) presented the purpose of the workshop (see above) and the broader fisheries context for the workshop, including:
 - i. Fishing methods, and the impacts of these on marine biodiversity in relation to gear type and, in particular, intensity of fishing.
 - ii. The lack of clarity and, in many cases, confusion arising from the 'approved' definitions for industrial fishing (WCC 2020 Red 55) and industrial fishing (FAO).
 - iii. IUCN's guidance on compatibility of fishing/collecting activities with different IUCN protected area management categories, which identifies four types of fishing but does not clearly define these (see table below).
 - iv. Regulation-based classifications for MPAs, of which the MPA Guide is the most commonly used, which were developed to help managers predict the conservation outcomes of different types of fisheries management.

Table 6: Compatibility of fishing/collecting activities in different management categories

IUCN category	Local fishing/ collecting	Recreational fishing/ collecting	Traditional fishing/ collecting	Industrial-scale fishing	Collection for research
Ia	No	No	No	No	No*
Ib	No	No	Yes**	No	Yes
II	No	No	Yes**	No	Yes
III	No	No	Yes**	No	Yes
IV	Variable#	Variable#	Yes	No	Yes
V	Yes#	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
VI	Yes#	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Key:

*	any extractive use of category Ia MPAs should be prohibited with possible exceptions for scientific research which cannot be done anywhere else.
**	in category Ib MPAs traditional fishing/collecting should be limited to an agreed sustainable quota for traditional, ceremonial or subsistence purposes, but not for purposes of commercial sale or trade.
#	whether fishing or collecting is or is not permitted will depend on the specific objectives of the MPA.

Setting the scene

Four presentations were given to set the scene (see separate document).

1. *Making fished MPAs work for marine conservation* – David Gill, Duke University

This provided a summary of a recent key paper [A diverse portfolio of marine protected areas can better advance global conservation and equity](#) which concluded, from an assessment of over 200 MPAs, that both no-take and multiple-use MPAs can generate positive conservation outcomes relative to no protection (increases in fish biomass of 58.2% for no-take and 12.6% for multiple-use MPAs). Relative performance depended on context and management. In particular, multiple-use MPA performance was low in high-pressure areas but produced similar outcomes to no-take MPAs when adequately staffed and when appropriate use regulations were applied. For places where no-take restrictions are either not possible or not ethical, the paper shows that well-designed and well-managed multiple-use MPAs represent a viable and potentially equitable solution.

2. *The MPA Guide and fisheries* – Jenna Sullivan-Stack, Oregon State University

This provided a brief overview of [the MPA Guide](#) (an activities-based classification tool), focusing on the guidance on fisheries that can be found in the [Expanded Guidance](#) of the MPA Guide. Many of the participants had attended the specific workshop on the MPA Guide which had taken place the previous day. Unlike formal protected area management effectiveness (PAME) assessments, the MPA Guide does not evaluate outcomes or use data from monitoring. However, it provides a useful predictor of conservation outcomes based the biodiversity outcomes that different human activities at different scales are expected to produce. There are now several examples of the MPA Guide being used, including [an assessment of the 100 largest MPAs in the World Database on Protected Areas](#), and a set of [Case studies using The MPA Guide](#). Such reviews are demonstrating that managers often find this a useful

tool, although it can give variable results depending on who does the analysis (e.g. managers vs external desk studies) and how assessors perceive the level of impacts. These studies are also showing how the MPA Guide can be used in combination with the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT).

3. ***Assignment of IUCN protected areas management categories to French MPAs and the relationship with the MPA Guide.*** Jean-Francois Sys, IUCN National French Committee

This presentation provided an overview of the assignment of IUCN protected area categories to 54 MPAs in France, and showed how the IUCN guidance on compatibility of different fishing methods in different categories has been applied. An assessment of the MPAs using the MPA Guide had also been undertaken. The overall analysis showed that only 21 sites met the all the criteria for an MPA, 18 were not assignable, and 15 may be better considered as OECMs. This raised many useful points of discussion and indicated areas where future clarification and updated guidance will be needed, and also highlighted that data is sometimes entered incorrectly into the World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA).

4. ***Fishing provisions and management in South Africa's MPAs.*** Jean Harris, WILDTRUST

Operation Phakisa, a South African government initiative, launched in 2014 to fast track the implementation of solutions on several critical development issues, included a component to expand the South African MPA network. The objectives of an MPA may include fishery support explicitly (e.g. fishery recovery and / or spill-over), and protection of species/ecosystems from fishing. The presentation provided a good example of how the issue of fisheries and MPAs can be addressed at national level. The new network was announced in 2019, with 42 MPAs established at different times. Core principles in the design of the network included several related to fishing: the network comprises both no-take areas and zones allowing a gradient of use and protection (Controlled, Restricted and Wilderness); reduced fishing effort throughout; decoupling of pelagic and benthic realm protection in use zones; and exclusion of activities that damage habitats (e.g. bottom-trawling) and high-risk industrial activities (mining and oil and gas industry). Depending on their impact on the natural features that an MPA was proclaimed to protect, activities are categorized red, orange, green. An assessment indicated that currently 31% of MPAs are well protected, ~35% moderately protected, ~18% poorly protected, and 13% not protected

Discussion

Following a short discussion in plenary, workshop participants agreed that it would be useful to identify key gaps in the current guidance and to prioritise activities and knowledge to address these gaps. In order to do this, participants divided into three groups to discuss three questions. The questions and the key points that participants raised in response to these, are summarized below (full notes from each group are available on request). These are listed here to provide an introduction to some of the topics that may need to be addressed when revising WCPA's guidance (see recommendations below).

1. **Why is the current IUCN guidance on fishing and MPAs not being applied, or is being used incorrectly?**

- i. Often the government is responsible for using and promoting the IUCN WCPA guidance and reporting on categories, but (a) often lacks the capacity to do so and (b) does not consult

enough with NGOs and local people involved in management of MPAs and thus holding the relevant information about them.

- ii. In some regions, local communities do not feel the guidance is relevant to them. In the extreme, this leads to new initiatives, such as Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs), with their own sets of guidance that may overlap and reflect IUCN guidance but use different terminology. This feeling is particularly strong in the Pacific.
- iii. Time lag: many MPAs will have been established before a new iteration of guidance appears, making it is difficult to apply the new guidance to the older MPAs, especially if legislation is required. In both South Africa and Portugal, earlier MPAs were established before the more detailed 2019 IUCN guidance had been published, with the matrix of management categories vs compatible fishing activities, which has led to zones being assigned categories that do not necessarily reflect the fishing regulations within them.
- iv. Donor projects and NGO assistance may be helping countries to implement guidance but, when funding ends, the process stops and the guidance may be forgotten; or capacity lost for implementation.

2. What are the key difficulties in understanding fishing impacts on biodiversity in MPAs?

- i. Uncertainty in the causality of changes in observed biodiversity within MPAs where fishing occurs. For example, whether declines in key species or changes in biodiversity might be driven by fishing impacts or due to other stressors such as climate change. Variability in gear types globally, the impacts of differing fishing efforts, and lack of understanding and ability to predict ecosystem impacts of fishing (e.g., due to the variability in ecosystems and gear types + cumulative impacts) are key issues.
- ii. The conservation objectives of an MPA are not always stated clearly, which means that the baseline for measuring change is equally not clear, and thus the data that needs to be collected. This is particularly the case if the objective is couched in general terms such as protection of the biodiversity within an area, rather than identifying key measurable components. This leads to questions such as “What scale are we looking at (for example, does biodiversity need to be monitored within MPAs only or also in unprotected / fished areas)?” Are we comparing biodiversity changes to a year ago or twenty years ago, and how do we decide on an appropriate timescale and baseline?”
- iii. The accuracy of fisheries data is often questioned, both in terms of what is landed, and from what locations, and also what is reported and, in some countries, it is unclear who is collecting this data. Efforts are being made to improve this but this uncertainty is important to consider when trying to improve understanding of fishing impacts on biodiversity.

3. What data / information do we need in order to provide guidance on fishing in MPAs?

- i. For MPAs where local communities are dependent on marine resources either within the boundaries or in immediately adjacent waters, monitoring of catches and other aspects of the local fisheries is vital. However, funding, capacity, training, equipment, technology and

analytical skills are often lacking to make monitoring sustainable and long-term. More attention needs to be paid to this.

- ii. There continues to be a need for greater recognition of the key role that fishers and local communities can play in data collection, and that their data is a vital complement to that of scientists and new technology. There are now many examples where this has been recognized, but it needs fuller acknowledgement.
- iii. Governments often take a risk-based approach which requires data, and MPAs are often data-deficient; requirements for more data tends to stall decision-making. Taking a precautionary approach requires less data than a risk-based approach but there is usually a reluctance to do this.

Conclusions

There is clearly much difficulty around classifying and categorizing MPAs, and applying the WCPA (and other) guidance for MPAs, for a variety of reasons. Key points that arose in discussions included:

- The **local context** of an MPA (ecological, social, economic, national legislation etc) is generally highly specific which makes it very difficult to develop guidance that is applicable everywhere.
- The issue of **fishing intensity** (and intensity of other activities) is rarely addressed when looking at threats and impacts; one participant felt this was the ‘elephant in the room’, noting that any gear type could be destructive if used too intensively.
- **Pelagic vs benthic biodiversity** – IUCN guidance has a strong presumption against vertical zoning (the guidance states that IUCN is ‘opposed’ to vertical zoning (section 5.5., [IUCN 2019](#))), on the grounds that, although interactions between benthic and pelagic systems and species are not yet fully known, ‘*surface or mid-water fisheries may in fact impact the benthic communities below*’, and this will generally be location specific. Differential management of pelagic and benthic fisheries within an MPA is addressed in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (see case study in IUCN, 2019) and within South African MPAs (presentation at the workshop). Further clarification of IUCN’s guidance on this is required.
- Given the difficulties in collecting biodiversity data for all MPAs, a **risk-based approach** that considers ‘likely’ fishing impacts would be useful. This could be used to assess, in a pragmatic way, which fishing gears, fished at what intensities, are compatible with an MPA’s conservation objectives.
- **Res 55 on industrial fishing** was an attempt to ‘draw a red line’ to distinguish MPAs from other area-based management, but the application of the definition of industrial fishing is difficult: the term ‘industrial fish’ is not commonly used outside the IUCN (e.g., FAO does not recognize this term); the definition does not take into account fishing effort; the definition could not be used for High Seas MPA because (almost exclusively) vessels operating in the High Seas are larger than the 12m vessel length used in the definition. The issue of large-scale commercial fishing needs further exploration (as demonstrated in the presentation on French MPAs).

- Although **no-take areas (highly/fully protected)** have the best conservation outcomes for marine biodiversity, multiple-use MPAs provide conservation benefits (David Gill's presentation). There is thus a need to provide further guidance on this in relation to the 30 x 30 target. Further discussions are required as to whether a percentage target for highly/fully protected is appropriate. The EU provides more specific guidance in its [Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#), and has committed to a target of at least 10% strictly protected within a larger target of [at least 30 % general protection of marine and terrestrial areas](#). Where no-take areas can be established whilst maintaining equitability and without disadvantaging livelihoods, a greater percent than 30% of highly/strictly protected area may be desirable.
- **Assignment of the IUCN categories:** despite [IUCN's principles and advice on assigning categories](#) (see Chap 4 in particular), few countries have the resources to follow the recommended process and thus categories are often wrongly applied or not reported on. [A case study on assignment of categories in the Bahamas](#) provides a useful example of the challenges involved.
- **OECMs:** There is also still on-going confusion on how OECMs differ from MPAs, despite the formal definition of an OECM and the [guidance on how to identify them](#). While protected areas must have a primary conservation objective, this is not necessary for OECMs which may be managed for many different objectives but must demonstrably deliver effective conservation. They may be managed with conservation as a primary or secondary objective, or long-term conservation may simply be the ancillary result of management activities. The FAO guidance on fisheries and OECMs will contribute to discussions on how to develop a better understanding of this. Similarly, more attention is needed to seasonal regulation of fisheries, where these have positive conservation outcomes; this relates to IUCN's definition of a protected area which requires that it is 'managed in perpetuity and not as a short term or temporary management strategy'. [Guidance on the requirement for long-term protection](#) of protected areas has recently been reviewed, and further thought may be required for this in the marine environment.

Recommendations

- Explore establishing a jointly led WCPA Task Force on fisheries and MPAs, in collaboration with the MPA Guide and other entities as appropriate, with the following broad objectives (to be refined once the group is in place):
 - Follow-up on Resolution 55 on industrial fishing, noting that this urgently needs addressing in the context of High Seas MPAs;
 - Update guidance – potentially to report on this at the 2025 World Conservation Congress;
 - Establish clearer relationships with the MPA Guide, and any other new initiatives underway to address this important issue.

The Task Force will complement and support IUCN's "Task force related to the implementation of WCC 2020 Res 107 on Reducing the Impact of Fisheries on Marine Biodiversity" which is engaged in a longer and more in-depth process to prepare a Situation Analysis on the effects of fisheries on biodiversity, to be presented at consultative workshops next year. The Task Force will also liaise with the IUCN SSC Marine Conservation Committee.

- Once some of the broader issues have been resolved, develop further guidance on the Green List Standard indicators for MPAs in relation to fishing.

Next steps

The IUCN WCPA marine team agreed to:

- a. **Prepare a report on the workshop** and its outcomes (by December 2024), for dissemination to relevant WCPA members, FAO, the WCC Resolution 107 Task Force, and the various groups providing guidance on OECMs.
- b. **Set up the task force on fisheries and MPAs.** The TOR will be finalized and members invited to participate. These will include participants at the workshop who expressed a particular interest in following through on the recommendations, plus other individuals involved in related issues (e.g. representatives of the Commission on Ecosystem Management, FAO etc.). A second ‘tier’ of participation will be individuals who cannot commit to the work required but who are willing to provide information or review materials as required.

Annex 1 – Participants List

Name	Affiliation	Country
Fabrice Stephenson	WCPA Marine (Vice Chair), Newcastle University	UK
Sue Wells	WCPA Marine, Independent consultant	UK
Spencer Chaisson	WCPA Marine	Canada
Sylvie Tranter	Newcastle University	UK
Barbara Horta E Costa	CCMAR; MPA Guide	Portugal
Johnny Briggs	Pew Trusts; MPA Guide	UK
Jenna Sullivan-Stack	MPA Guide, Oregon State University	USA
Gabrielle Johnson	MPA Center, NOAA	USA
David Gill	Duke University	USA
Jean-Francois Sys	French IUCN Committee (recorded presentation)	France
Jean Harris	WildTrust	South Africa
Kendyl Wright	WildTrust	South Africa
Sandile Ntuli	WildTrust	South Africa
Sangeeta Mangubhai	Consultant/MPA guide	Fiji
Beth Taylor	Macalister-Elliott	UK
Coralie Palmer	Global Center for Species Survival, Indianapolis Zoological Society; IUCN Species Survival Commission	USA
Ella Clausius	Univ Tasmania	Australia
Rick Stuart-Smith	Univ Tasmania	Australia
Sarah Bedolfe	OCEANA	USA
Lydia Koehler	Howell Marine Consulting	UK
Petch Manopawitr	IUCN	Thailand
Nico Willemse	Blue Nature Alliance/Africa Regional Lead	Namibia
Bani Maini	Oregon State University	USA
Sinothando Shibe	South African National Biodiversity Institute	South Africa
Mamadou Sidibe	Ministry of Environment	Senegal
Katy Nalven	MPA Guide, Seaside Solutions	USA
Katy Walker	Fauna and Flora International	UK
Kyle Clifton	Gitga'at First Nation	Canada