



Submission to the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans regarding its Marine and Coastal Protection Study

OCEANA CANADA BRIEF ON THE RATIONALE OF PROTECTING CANADA'S MARINE HABITATS AND BIODIVERSITY



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Brief on the rationale of protecting Canada's marine habitats and biodiversity for the benefit of nature, healthy fisheries, and abundant oceans

Summary

Biodiversity loss in Canada's oceans is driven by human activities and industries like offshore oil and gas, mining, pollution, and overfishing and destructive fishing practices. This loss is impacting Canada's marine species and fish stocks, with over half of marine and coastal species having declined in the past half-century and only 35% of Canada's fish stocks are considered healthy.

Canada has legal obligations to create Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). There is scientific consensus that protecting at least 30% of ocean and coastal areas, through strategically conserving and managing areas with high ecological value, can help slow or reverse biodiversity losses. The Government of Canada has pledged to achieve this by the year 2030 by adopting the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Target 3). This must be done by protecting areas with high ecological value, including critical habitats for species, important geographic and biological features, and connective habitats across migration routes.

Fishing is allowed to occur in MPAs, which are established for the long-term conservation of nature and not explicitly for the economic benefit of fisheries although fisheries do indeed benefit from well-designed MPAs. Fishing activity is not prohibited in MPAs, with the exception of bottom trawling in all MPAs established after 2019. All other fishing activities are regulated or restricted on a case-by-case basis, depending on conservation objectives of each MPA. Extensive engagement with stakeholders must take place at each stage of establishing an MPA.

Well-designed MPAs can provide numerous benefits, including to coastal communities and fisheries, ecosystem resilience to climate change, food security and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Oceana Canada recommends that the Canadian federal government continue to support and invest in implementing the Global Biodiversity Framework, including protecting 30% of Canada's oceans and essential marine habitats and rebuilding sustainable, well-managed fisheries to benefit coastal communities for generations to come.

Canada is losing its biodiversity

Canada is experiencing sustained and measurable declines in biodiversity, including in marine environments in all three oceans. Since 1970, over half of monitored populations of marine and coastal species have declined in abundance¹, and less than 35% of Canada's fish populations are healthy². The causes of biodiversity decline are well-established and overwhelmingly linked to human activities. Industrial development, oil and gas extraction, pollution, habitat destruction by destructive industrial or fishing practices, and overfishing exert pressure on marine ecosystems, and the effects of these impacts are cumulative³. The consequences of biodiversity loss directly impact Canadians- the collapse of northern cod in Newfoundland and Labrador brought about devastating economic impacts to the province.

There is global consensus that biodiversity loss can slow or reverse with strong, deliberate and concerted action⁴, including by protecting and conserving representative, rare, or vulnerable habitats, or areas that provide essential ecosystem services. Establishing MPAs is one of many tools that governments or communities can employ to conserve habitats and species in specific areas and support biodiversity recovery. Like Canada's National Parks on land, MPAs protect sensitive environments from harmful activities that would destroy their productivity.

Canada has made evidence-based and legally binding commitments to protect biodiversity

In 2022, Canada joined 195 other countries in adopting the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#), which outlined 4 goals to halt biodiversity loss, strengthen the integrity and resilience of ecosystems, and achieve sustainable management of resources and ecosystem benefits. The framework includes 23 targets, outlining actions signatory countries should initiate and implement to achieve the goals.

Under Target 3 of the framework, countries agree to protect and conserve at least 30 per cent of their lands, freshwater and oceans, especially "*areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services*", under MPAs or other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) by the year 2030.

Biodiversity is not distributed evenly on the planet, and some areas have greater importance for overall biodiversity and ecosystem services than others. To best achieve results for nature

¹ WWF-Canada. 2025. Living Planet Report Canada: Wildlife at Home. Currie J. & Snider J. World Wildlife Fund Canada. Toronto, Canada

² Schijns R, Rangeley R. 2025. Fishery Audit 2025: Unlocking Canada's Potential for Abundant Oceans. Oceana Canada. Toronto, Canada

³ Halpern BS, Frazier M, O'Hara CC, Vargas-Fonseca OA, Lombard AT. 2025. Cumulative impacts to global marine ecosystems projected to more than double by mid-century. *Science*. 389(6766):1216-9.

⁴ Díaz S, Zafra-Calvo N, Purvis A, Verburg PH, Obura D, Leadley P, Chaplin-Kramer R, De Meester L, Dulloo E, Martín-López B, Shaw MR. 2020. Set ambitious goals for biodiversity and sustainability. *Science* 370(6515):411-3. DOI: [10.1126/science.abe1530](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abe1530)

and for people, emphasis should be placed on protecting areas that are critical habitats of key species, contain geographic or biological features that coincide with high biodiversity (i.e. kelp forests, seamounts and submarine canyons), fragile or vulnerable habitats (i.e. corals and sponges), or connective networks for migratory species.

Scientific consensus shows that to halt and reverse species loss and maintain biodiversity values, the total area that must be protected amounts to *at least* 30% of the world's oceans⁵, underscoring the rationale for Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Establishing MPAs and marine refuges does not prohibit fishing

MPAs are established with the objective of long-term conservation of nature: habitats, species, ecosystems, and the benefits they provide.

In Canada MPAs created under the *Oceans Act*, National Marine Conservation Areas, Marine National Wildlife Areas, and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries, if established after 2019, are all subject to the [Federal Marine Protected Areas Protection Standard](#) which prohibits activities that destroy the sea bottom, or have long term consequences such as oil and gas exploration, mining activities, disposal at sea, and bottom-trawl fishing.

Marine refuges, designated under the *Fisheries Act* and considered Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) are closures used for the purposes of management or control of specific fish, fisheries and fish habitats. They are more flexible tools that contribute to and benefit biodiversity but are not subject to the prohibitions in the *Federal Marine Protected Areas Protection Standard*; marine refuges and OECMs complement MPAs. All existing or foreseeable activities in marine refuges and OECMs, including fishing, are assessed on a case-by-case basis. The key distinction between MPAs and marine refuges lies in their intent- MPAs are clearly established to holistically protect and conserve nature and biodiversity.

Industry engagement is essential

Engagement with fishing industry stakeholders and other ocean users is an essential component throughout all stages of MPA selection, design, establishment and management. While each site has its own unique considerations and stakeholders, establishing MPAs in practice in Canada involves repeated and systematic engagement of stakeholders at each stage, from preliminary dialogues and pre-planning, to assessing feasibility, to regulatory development. It takes an average of 7 years, and in several cases over a decade, for an area

⁵ Woodley S, Locke H, Laffoley D, MacKinnon K, Sandwith T, Smart J. 2019. A review of evidence for area-based conservation targets for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. *Parks* 25(2):31-46.

proposed as an MPA to be formally designated⁶. It is imperative that proposed MPAs are selected based on a strong foundation of scientific evidence, and that this evidence is weighed appropriately during negotiation. When socioeconomic concessions are made without being subject to scientific review, the ecological effectiveness of the MPA can be affected⁷.

MPAs are not primarily fisheries management tools, although fisheries may benefit from an MPA. Effective fisheries stewardship and strong marine conservation are both critical elements of a broader ocean management strategy. In Canada, just 34.5% of major fish stocks are considered healthy, 16.5% are considered critically depleted, and 33.5% have insufficient data to determine stock health². In addition to protecting important marine habitats and meeting the commitment to conserve 30% of Canada's oceans, full implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework requires Canada to address gaps in rebuilding fisheries and ensure that all major fish stocks are prescribed under the legally binding Fish Stock Provisions of the *Fisheries Act*.

MPAs provide multiple benefits

By setting aside important marine areas from human activity, MPAs offer many benefits to the local ecosystem, broader ocean environment, and Canadian communities. Inside an MPA, species have access to critical habitats and are protected from impacts of human activities. When MPAs are well-designed and strategically placed, the total number and average size of species have been shown to increase, allowing for populations to grow and produce more offspring, which can disperse outside MPA boundaries and benefit harvesters⁸. Larger local populations and greater genetic diversity make species and ecosystems more resilient to disturbance and stress in the face of climate change⁹. MPAs protect vulnerable ecosystems, like coral and sponge habitats, by preventing the risk of damage by trawling or drilling the seabed, thereby creating refugia for the many other species that rely on them¹⁰. MPAs provide a way for Indigenous Peoples to protect and steward their territorial waters and

⁶ Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. 2021. MPA Monitor: Assessing Canada's Marine Protected Areas. <https://cpaws.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/CPAWS-MPA-Monitor-2021-EN-for-publication.pdf>

⁷ Muntoni M, Devillers R, Koen-Alonso M. 2019. Science should not be left behind during the design of a Marine Protected Area: Meeting conservation priorities while integrating stakeholder interests. *FACETS* 4:472-492. DOI:10.1139/ facets-2018-0033

⁸ Lester SE, Halpern BS, Grorud-Colvert K, Lubchenco J, Ruttenberg BI, Gaines SD, Airamé S, Warner RR. 2009. Biological effects within no-take marine reserves: a global synthesis. *Mar Ecol Prog Ser* 384:33-46 <https://doi.org/10.3354/meps08029>

⁹ Ortiz-Villa EM, Rassweiler A, Caselle JE, Cavanaugh KC, Arafeh-Dalmau N, Bell TW, Cavanaugh KC. 2025. Marine protected areas enhance climate resilience to severe marine heatwaves for kelp forests. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 62(9):2439-53. DOI: 10.1111/1365-2664.70112

¹⁰ Feyrer L, Walmsley SF, Stewart MA, MacNeil MA, Whitehead H. Reversing decline: The impact of spatial conservation on endangered northern bottlenose whales. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 62(9):2464-74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2664.70122>

receive support and resources to do so, and can support food security, economic resilience and community wellbeing.

Recommendation: The Canadian federal government continue to support and invest in implementing the Global Biodiversity Framework, including protecting 30% of Canada's oceans and essential marine habitats and rebuilding sustainable, well-managed fisheries to benefit coastal communities for generations to come.

Canada has made measurable strides in advancing ocean protection, having now protected 15.54% of national oceans to date. With 2030 quickly approaching, this is a pivotal moment to stay on course and meet the commitment of protecting 30 percent of Canada's oceans in the coming years. Continued momentum will depend on sustained federal leadership—ensuring that departments, Indigenous partners, coastal communities, and stakeholders have the support, direction, and long-term investment needed to implement the Global Biodiversity Framework effectively. Strengthening governance, maintaining stable funding, and accelerating place-based conservation initiatives will be essential to securing healthy, resilient marine ecosystems for future generations.

About Oceana Canada

Oceana Canada was established as an independent charity in 2015 and is part of the largest international advocacy group dedicated solely to ocean conservation. Oceana Canada has successfully campaigned to ban single-use plastics, end the shark fin trade, make rebuilding depleted fish populations the law, improve the way fisheries are managed and protect marine habitat. We work with civil society, academics, fishers, Indigenous Peoples, and governments to return Canada's formerly vibrant oceans to health and abundance. By restoring Canada's oceans, we can strengthen our communities, reap greater economic and nutritional benefits, and protect our future.