



## Opinion

# Canada needs better protection for its ocean-protected areas, says new report

Many of Canada's Marine Protected Areas have weak or ineffective safeguards against the ecological impacts of development and exploitation.

BY SANDRA SCHWARTZ

When Canada declared 14 per cent of its ocean was protected from overfishing, pollution and industrial development a couple of years ago, the world took notice of a come-from-behind conservation champion.

The country had pledged—along with almost 200 other signatories to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity—to safeguard fish and other marine life in at least 10 per cent of its territorial marine waters by 2020, but it seemed stuck for years at less than one per cent. In 2019, with the deadline fast approaching, Canada finally surged ahead, announcing enough new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to surpass its target and raising the country's profile as an international conservation leader.

However, it also raised a critical question: in the urgent race to protect quantifiably larger areas of our ocean, are we compromising the quality of that protection? The answer, according to a new report by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), appears to be yes.

In its first assessment of federal MPAs that Ottawa now counts as protected, CPAWS found that many have weak or ineffective safeguards against

the ecological impacts of development and exploitation. Using a new scientific assessment process, the report looked at 18 MPAs that cover 8.3 per cent of Canada's ocean, and found that just seven of the sites, occupying less than seven per cent of the total area examined, could be considered "strongly protected." The remaining 11 sites, including many of the largest, were evaluated as being either "weakly protected," "incompatible with a conservation designation," or—in one case—with no regulatory protection at all yet.

The level of protection within the assessed MPAs varied widely across regions, too. In the Atlantic region, for example, almost 80 per cent of the area within evaluated MPAs was strongly protected, while 14 per cent was weakly protected and six per cent was incompatible with conservation.

In the Pacific region, however, only 38 per cent of the area evaluated was strongly protected, 0.4 per cent was weakly protected, and more than 61 per cent was considered incompatible with biodiversity conservation. This was largely due to the Scott Islands MPA, a poorly protected marine site which accounts for almost half the MPA coverage in the Pacific.

The report's findings came barely a week after Canada and other global nations met at the Convention on Biological Diversity's COP15 to begin finalizing a new plan to stem the tide of vanishing species over the next decade. New conservation targets under the UN biodiversity convention are expected next spring. Canada has already promised that its plans include protecting 25 per cent of Canadian marine areas by 2025 and at least 30 per cent by 2030.

The goals are laudable, but Canada needs to accelerate



A new report by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) suggests Canada is compromising the quality of our ocean protection efforts. *Photograph courtesy of James Wheeler/CPAWS*

action if these targets are going to be reached. According to the CPAWS report, existing federally designated MPAs have taken an average of more than seven years to progress from "proposed" to "designated" and another four years for the development of a management plan.

Scientists consider MPAs to be among the most effective tools for restoring ocean habitats, rebuilding biodiversity, and helping species adapt to climate change—but only when they're well protected and managed. Although seven per cent of the world's ocean is officially considered protected, the Marine Conservation Institute estimates that only 2.7 per cent offers safeguards strong enough for effective conservation.

Canada, with the planet's longest coastline skirting three vast ocean regions, is perfectly positioned to help lead the world in saving marine life. Our recent push to create more and effective MPAs—especially in the Maritimes—has the attention of the international community. So does our promise to more than double our current MPAs within this decade.

In April 2019, Canada became the first nation to commit to minimum protection standards for MPAs that prohibit some of the most harmful activities, such as bottom trawling, oil and gas development, mining and dumping. Yet, so far, these standards are not widely or consistently applied, according to the report.

The world is watching. The new CPAWS report should be Canada's call to action. The recommendations urge improved regulations and policies to ensure Canadian MPAs provide biologically meaningful safeguards for the conservation of marine life.

Including more of Canada's ocean within MPAs that are strongly protected is essential for saving the ocean life that humanity depends upon. If we are to be leaders in marine conservation, we must not lose sight of the need for MPA quality in the critical race for MPA quantity.

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