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California Creates a Globally Significant Network of Marine Protected Areas

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California recently completed an historic overhaul of how it manages its coastal waters by revising and expanding its system of marine protected areas (MPAs). This system of MPAs is the largest scientifically based network in the U.S. and second largest in the world. How California accomplished this consequential achievement is the subject of a March special issue of the journal *Ocean and Coastal Management* released last month. Articles analyze the challenges, achievements and lessons learned in the public MPA planning processes.

Under a mandate from the state's 1999 Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA), California's network of MPAs designated by the California Fish and Game Commission have greatly increased the proportion of state waters protected. The resulting network designates approximately 9.4 percent of state waters as "no-take" MPAs, and about 16 percent of state waters are now under some form of protection, which is a dramatic increase in coverage. Informed by science and crafted with significant stakeholder involvement, California's new network of 124 designated areas (including 119 MPAs and five recreational management areas, all managed within the network) replaced 63 existing MPAs that were mostly small (covering just 2.7 percent of state waters, with less than ¼ percent in no-take MPAs) and considered ineffective. The area covered by the MPAs represents approximately 60 percent of all no-take MPAs within the waters of the 48 contiguous U.S. states. Planning for this network of MPAs yields important lessons for other planning efforts globally.

The special issue of *Ocean and Coastal Management* includes nine articles by key participants from the MLPA Initiative, an innovative public-private partnership between the California Natural Resources Agency, California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Resources Legacy Fund Foundation. The Initiative was tasked with helping the state redesign its MPAs in conjunction with stakeholders, scientists, experts, resource managers, policy-makers and the public. The articles have now been made available for free download at the journal website.

"This special issue provides an important record of the MLPA Initiative's work and how California conducted public processes to design an improved system of MPAs and therefore provides important lessons that can inform other similar efforts," said Mary Gleason, senior scientist at The Nature Conservancy.

"The network of MPAs was designed by stakeholders with guidance from scientists, managing agencies, experts, members of the public and policy-makers, to meet the six goals of the MLPA, while also allowing for human uses of marine resources – understandably a complicated task that involved tradeoffs and compromises but with the vision that the MPA network will provide long-term benefits to California and our marine environment," said Ken Wiseman, executive director of the MLPA Initiative.

Informed by scientific guidance intended to increase benefits and ecological connections among individual MPAs, this improved network is also globally significant.

"Completing the nation's first statewide open coast system of marine protected areas strengthens California's ongoing commitment to conserve marine life for future generations," said Charlton H. Bonham, director of the Department of Fish and Wildlife. "This statewide system will also benefit fish and fishermen in California for generations to come. And, the science shows that by protecting sensitive ocean and coastal habitats, marine life flourishes and in turn, creates a healthier system overall."

The California Fish and Game Commission, the decision-making authority under the MLPA, acted on the basis of recommendations delivered by the MLPA Initiative, which conducted four regional public planning processes between 2005 and 2011. California's MLPA calls for redesigning the state's existing MPAs to meet specific goals to increase coherence and effectiveness in protecting the state's marine life, habitats, ecosystems and natural heritage as well as

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to improve recreational, educational and study opportunities provided by marine ecosystems subject to minimal human disturbance.

Critical to successfully completing the new MPA network planning processes were some distinctive elements that are highlighted in the special issue, including:

- Certain enabling conditions were in place in California to support the public MPA network planning: a legislative act, political support and sufficient funding to support a multi-year effort.
- The MLPA Initiative was a public-private partnership structured through formal agreements and charged with working with stakeholders, scientists, experts, resource managers, policy-makers and the public to develop recommendations for an improved network of MPAs.
- The MLPA Blue Ribbon Task Force (BRTF), composed of experienced policy makers, provided oversight to the process and forwarded final recommendations to the California Fish and Game Commission. The BRTF played a crucial role in managing complex and contentious issues, balancing tradeoffs and maintaining momentum toward completing the planning processes.
- The MLPA Master Plan Science Advisory Team provided robust scientific guidance and assessment, including developing simple guidelines for MPA network design based on ecological principles intended to support achieving the six MLPA goals. Marine scientists from many institutions participated in the planning process, including researchers from the University of California campuses at Davis, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz and Ecotrust who developed mathematical models to project the fisheries costs and benefits, in terms of both economics and conservation, of the proposed MPAs. Contract technical support provided additional science capacity and developed new interactive, spatially explicit decision support tools, including [MarineMap](#).
- The MLPA Initiative overcame some of the challenges of prior statewide planning efforts, unsuccessful in part due to the size and complexity of California's coast, by sequencing the work of the MLPA Initiative into four coastal regions which allowed planning and stakeholder engagement at more appropriate scales.
- The MLPA Initiative was controversial and confronted a variety of political and legal challenges. Some fishing interests strongly opposed the process and viewed MPAs, which in part limit fishing in specific areas, as unnecessary for fisheries already subject to other regulations. Other stakeholders judged the redesigned and adopted MPAs as insufficient to meet the ecosystem protection goals of the MLPA.
- An important challenge to adaptively managing MPAs over the long-term will be to demonstrate success in meeting the goals of the MLPA, including rebuilding or sustaining marine life populations.

"Science dictated the establishment of these MPAs, and their success will be reflected in data acquired through cost-effective monitoring. We are confident that monitoring will show the same results as elsewhere in the oceans: MPAs work." said Mike Weber, program officer with the Resources Legacy Fund Foundation.

Design of the MPA network aimed to meet science and design feasibility guidelines to help achieve the identified goals; final decisions in each region necessarily reflected tradeoffs needed to garner public acceptance and support for implementing the MPAs. California is developing mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of the MPA network in the coming years, including establishing the MPA Monitoring Enterprise and a process for periodic review and adaptive management of MPAs. The first periodic review will take place in 2013 for the central coast, affording the first opportunity to test the adaptive management aspect of the MLPA.

"This first-of-its-kind network of MPAs in the United States shows how citizens can work with their government to apply the best of science to create a lasting ocean legacy for future generations," observed Meg Caldwell, executive director of the [Center for Ocean Solutions](#) at Stanford University in California.

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Links:

Ocean and Coastal Management special issue – <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/09645691/74>

California's Marine Protected Areas – www.dfg.ca.gov/marine/mpa

Center for Ocean Solutions - www.centerforoceansolutions.org

California Natural Resources Agency – www.resources.ca.gov

California Department of Fish and Wildlife – www.dfg.ca.gov

California Fish and Game Commission – www.fgc.ca.gov

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