

Network Launched for Managers of Very Large MPAs

A new network has been created to help managers of large-scale MPAs — greater than 250,000 km² in area — to share their experience in addressing the unique challenges of overseeing such vast protected areas. The Big Ocean network, as it is called, was launched in December and includes the managers of five MPAs so far: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Australia), Marianas Trench Marine National Monument (US), Motu Motiro Hiva Marine Park surrounding Sala y Gómez Island (Chile), Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (US), and Phoenix Islands Protected Area (Kiribati).

Aside from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which was designated in the 1970s, these large-scale MPAs have all been designated in the past decade. Best practice for managing such broad and remote areas, including enforcing them, remains largely unknown. The Big Ocean network managers have launched a website — www.bigoceanmanagers.org — to raise awareness of their common challenges and potential solutions, and they plan additional communication methods to foster knowledge-sharing. A press release on the network is available on the website.

ʻAulani Wilhelm, NOAA superintendent of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument and originator of the Big Ocean network concept, talks here about the challenges of large MPAs and how the network will help:

On challenges of managing large-scale MPAs:

Large-scale MPAs — encompassing integrated marine ecosystems across multiple habitats — compound and magnify existing challenges in marine conservation and management. At the same time, they bring a specific set of issues that are unique to such scales, and relatively poorly understood. Examples of these unique challenges include:

- Inadequate enforcement presence and monitoring effort given the large and/or remote scales involved;
- Enormous logistical challenges and travel costs associated with management of large, remote areas, far from population centers and resources;
- Existing management capacity and resource allocation limitations that are compounded when spread across such large geographic areas;
- Public interest and outreach relevance challenges given the physical distance such areas may be from human presence and consistent public awareness; and

- Poor or incomplete understanding of how “source-sink” reproductive and recruitment dynamics relate to native species, particularly for economically valuable highly migratory species that may reside in or travel through the large-scale MPAs during part of their life history.

More often than not, large-scale MPA site managers have been isolated from one another. Until now, they have been operating without the opportunity to regularly and formally share experiences, knowledge, lessons, and unique solutions relating to large-scale MPAs.

On how the Big Ocean network will help:

The hope is that through this network we can improve management across and among geographic areas; identify gaps and provide guidance to better align science, management and community; and aid in the development of future large-scale sites to build upon our experiences. We also hope this network will provide a vehicle to increase engagement with regional and international bodies and NGOs that are involved in marine conservation, and that are particularly interested in supporting the role of large-scale sites.

On growing the network:

The starting definition of “large-scale MPA” that we used to launch Big Ocean is “a marine conservation area over 100,000 square miles (258,998 km²) in size that is actively managed for protection across the entire geographic boundary of the site.” Thus, the primary descriptors that define us are “large” and “managed”. This is not a closed network. We welcome other existing or proposed sites to join with us. We also welcome supporters of large-scale MPAs to become part of the network to share in our efforts to bring this relatively new marine conservation community together and strengthen our capacities at the site level. 🌊

For more information:

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