

AN INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT of MPA and OTHER AREA-BASED CONSERVATION MEASURE COMMITMENTS made at all to-date OUR OCEAN CONFERENCES

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A SUMMARY of the TECHNICAL REPORT to the OUR OCEAN CONFERENCE

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An Independent Test of OOC Accountability

In a nutshell:

- The Our Ocean Conferences have made an outsized contribution to global marine conservation efforts. A total of **40% of the globally implemented area in MPAs came from announcements made at the OOC**. These commitments account for 8,614,791 km² (3,326,189 square miles) or 2.4% of the ocean.
- The OOC's commitment to accountability is paying off, at least in the MPA thematic track. **Two-thirds (67%) of the MPA/ABM commitments to date have been completed. The rest all show evidence of progress** given their intended date of completion.
- Even greater outcomes will result if the remaining commitments are implemented. **If all MPAs/ABMs promised at OOCs were implemented**, a total 14,288,082 km² (5,516,659 square miles) or **4.0% of the ocean would be protected due to OOC actions alone**.
- Implementing the remaining OOC-committed MPAs and adding these to the number of MPAs already implemented worldwide (both OOC and non-OOC) would protect 7.7% of the ocean. **If these OOC remaining commitments are fulfilled along with other promised MPAs worldwide, the total area of the ocean protected would be 8.9%**.
- As recognized by *The MPA Guide*, Fully and Highly Protected MPAs provide the greatest conservation benefit to support human wellbeing. Of the 8.9% that would be protected **if all current commitments were met, one-third (3.0%) would be Fully or Highly Protected**.
- This independent review of OOC commitments in the MPA/ABM theme required extensive data gathering to track progress. The existing registry for tracking implementation on OOC commitments is insufficient for transparently tracking how effective the OOC has been in the MPA thematic area, as we have done here, as well as tracking the five other thematic areas. **We urge OOC hosts and participants to improve the registry to enable accountability.**

A hallmark of the Our Ocean Conferences (OOCs) has been a strong commitment to accountability for action on the announcements made at the conference. In 2017, our research group at Oregon State University, led by Dr. Jane Lubchenco and Dr. Kirsten Grorud-Colvert, began tracking the OOC commitments in the "MPAs and other area-based conservation measures (ABMs)" category, one of six themes at this annual conference. A progress report for the first four OOCs (2014 - 2017) was published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal in 2019.²

This current report analyzes the types of MPA/ABM announcements made at all OOCs to date, evaluates progress made across these commitments, and recommends actions to strengthen accountability for all OOCs and thus make progress toward global goals.

For this report, we conducted an independent, in-depth assessment of progress on pledges made in the MPA and ABM theme at the six OOCs from 2014 to 2019 (the OOC was postponed in 2020 and 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic).

The 259 MPA and other ABM announcements made across these years constituted 18% of all OOC announcements across all thematic areas. Some MPA and ABM announcements included multiple actions, such as creating or expanding an MPA plus making a financial commitment. We evaluated the current status of each of the 352 actions.

Figure 1 shows the current status of these 352 actions by country. In total, nearly 67% of the MPA and ABM actions have been completed to date. The rest all show evidence of progress, given their intended date of completion.

The total area of the ocean committed for protection by OOC announcements is 14,288,082 km². We have tracked progress toward implementation of the 218 new or expanded MPAs and other ABMs announced at OOCs. We follow the definition of "implemented" from *The MPA Guide*³: these areas are in place, with rules and regulations active so that biodiversity conservation benefits can begin to accrue.

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³ Grorud-Colvert, K., J. Sullivan-Stack, C. M. Roberts, V. Constant, B. Horta e Costa, E. P. Pike, N. Kingston, D. Laffoley, E. Sala, J. Claudet, A. M. Friedlander, D. A. Gill, S. E. Lester, J. C. Day, E. J. Gonçalves, G. N. Ahmadi, M. Rand, A. Villagomez, N. C. Ban, G. G. Gurney, A. Spalding, N. J. Bennett, J. Briggs, L. E. Morgan, R. A. Moffitt, M. Deguignet, E. Pikitch, E. S. Darling, S. Jessen, S. Hameed, G. Di Carlo, P. Guidetti, J. Harris, J. Torge, Z. Kazilkaya, T. Agardy, P. M. Cury, N. Shah, K. Sack, L. Cao, M. Fernandez, and J. Lubchenco. 2021. *The MPA Guide: A framework to achieve global goals for the ocean*. *Science*. eabf086. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abfo861>

Currently, 8,614,791 km² (3,326,189 square miles) or 2.4% of the ocean is protected by implemented MPAs and other ABMs that were announced as OOC commitments. If all the OOC commitments were completed, 14,288,082 km² (5,516,659 square miles) or 4.0% of the ocean would be protected in MPAs and other ABMs as a result of the OOC alone.

Adding the existing MPAs that are already in place globally, and implementing these remaining OOC-committed MPAs as well as other committed MPAs that are not yet completed, would lead to 8.9% of the ocean protected overall. Of that, one-third (3.0%) would be Fully or Highly Protected based on current commitments.



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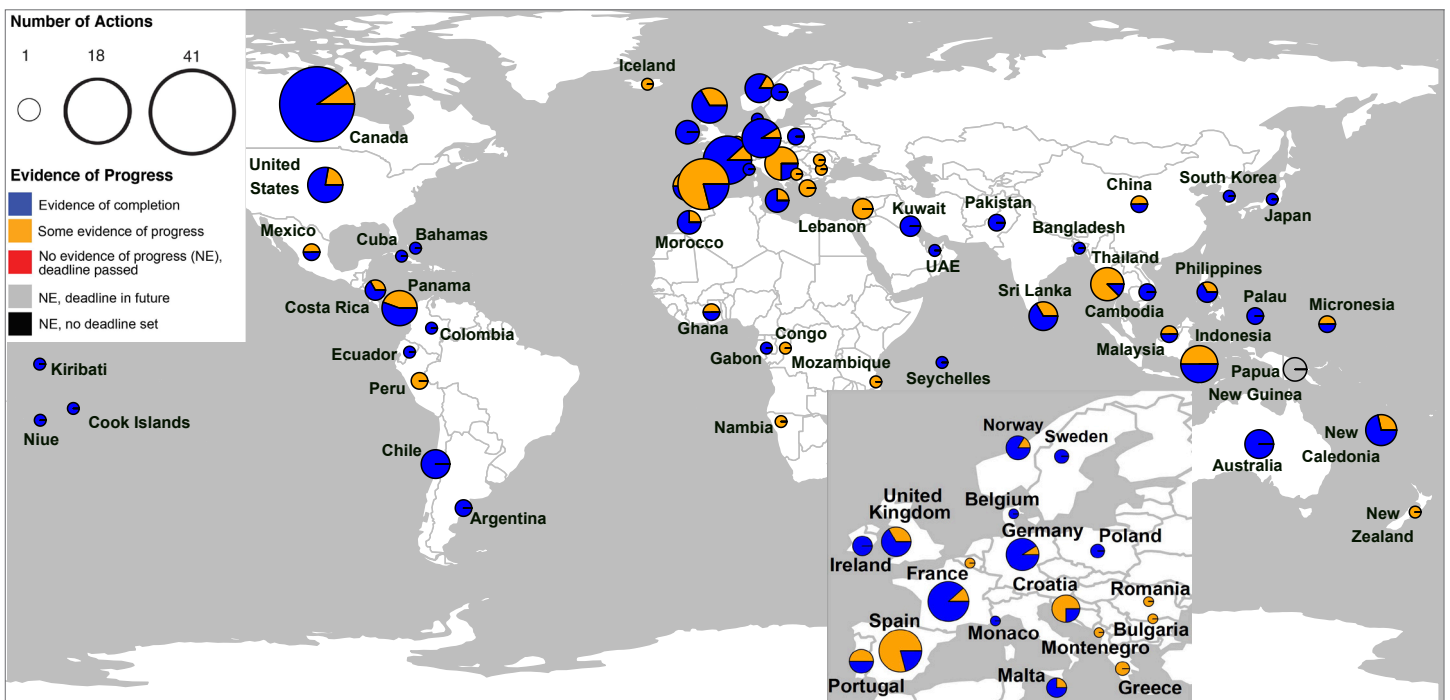


Figure 1. Status of progress made on the 352 MPA actions announced by countries at the 2014–2019 Our Ocean Conferences, as of January 2022. One of five categories was assigned to each action based on the evidence of progress found for that action. Some actions had evidence of completion (blue) and others showed some evidence of progress (yellow). Some actions had no evidence of progress but their intended date of completion was in the future (grey). We also tracked actions that did not give an intended date of completion and had no evidence of progress (black) and actions that passed their intended date of completion and had no evidence of progress (red), but as of this analysis, no action fell into either of these latter two categories.

Findings

A. TYPES OF MPA AND OTHER ABM COMMITMENTS AND WHO MADE THEM

- Many different actions have been announced.** A total of 1,401 announcements were made across all six OOC themes from 2014 – 2019, with 18% of these announcements in the MPA and other ABM theme (259 announcements). Many announcements included more than one action, so we evaluated all 352 separate actions. Each of these represents a tangible commitment to ocean protection.
- Many different bodies made these commitments.** 61 countries and 42 other organizations [intergovernmental bodies, industry, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), philanthropies, and universities] committed MPA or other ABM actions at the OOCs. Governments contributed 75% of all MPA/ABM actions.
- Certain types of pledges dominated the commitments.** Across all six OOCs to-date, *new* protected areas and *expanded* protected areas accounted for the largest proportion of MPA/ABM actions (149 actions; 43%), followed by financial pledges (96; 27%), policies (51; 14%), and partnerships (24; 7%). Other categories (such as education and infrastructure) accounted for the remaining 9% of actions.
- Both participation and number of actions have changed through time.** The numbers of MPA actions increased substantially: from 7 actions in 2014 to 111 actions in 2017 (a greater than 15-fold increase), then decreased to 85 actions in 2018, and 64 actions in 2019. Numbers of sectors making commitments, as well as types of commitments, increased overall from 2014 to 2019.

B. THE COMMITMENTS HAVE RESULTED IN ACTION: OVER TWO-THIRDS HAVE BEEN COMPLETED.

- To the best of our knowledge, 67% of all OOC MPA/ABM actions have been completed and 31% show at least some evidence of progress but are not yet complete (Figure 2). There is insufficient information to evaluate the remaining < 2%, but note that all of these completion dates are in the future (Figures 2 and 3).
- Approximately 42% of MPA/ABM actions (149 actions out of the total 352) were pledges to create a new MPA or ABM or expand an existing MPA or ABM,

sometimes for multiple MPAs in a single action. The majority (121) were for MPAs; 28 were for ABMs.

- A total of 218 individual MPAs and other ABMs was announced, either creating a new area or expanding an existing area. Of these, 70 have been *implemented*⁴ and cover over 8.6 million km², or 2.4% of the ocean (Figure 4).

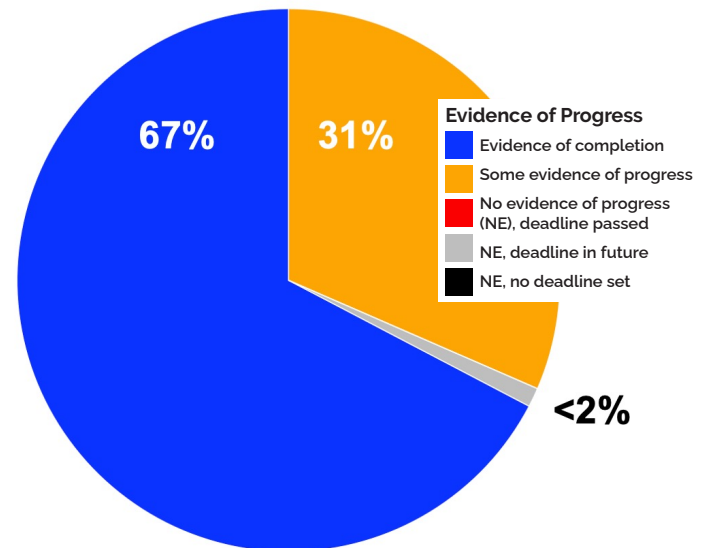


Figure 2. Progress made on all 352 MPA/ABM actions pledged at Our Ocean Conferences from 2014-2019. Each action was assigned to one of five progress categories (see legend) based on the evidence found for that action.

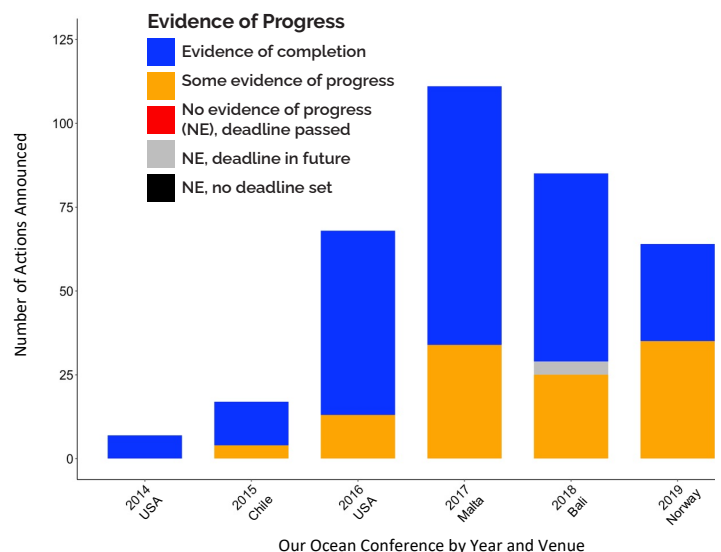


Figure 3. The status of progress made on all 352 MPA/ABM actions, by year announced (2014–2019) at the Our Ocean Conference. Each action was assigned to one of five progress categories based on the evidence found for that action.

⁴ "Implemented" is defined following *The MPA Guide*. The MPA/ABM has transitioned from existence 'on paper' to being operational 'in the water' with management plans activated. Biodiversity conservation benefits begin to accrue at this stage, not before (Grorud-Colvert *et al.* 2021).

- Of the 218 individually committed MPAs or other ABMs, 148 have yet to be implemented. If these remaining OOC-committed MPAs and other ABMs were to be implemented, they would protect an additional 1.6% of the ocean (Figure 4). Implementing these remaining MPAs/ABMs would bring the total area protected globally by OOC commitments alone to over 14 million km², or 4.0% of the ocean.
- If the remaining OOC-committed MPAs and other ABMs were implemented (1.6%) this would protect 7.7% of the ocean⁵. Adding additional committed MPAs worldwide would bring the total to 8.9% of the ocean protected (Figure 4). The OOCs thus have the potential to make an even greater impact on the proposed "30x30" target for the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework once all commitments are realized.
- MPAs and other ABMs not only need to be implemented to be effective, but they also require adequate levels of protection to meet biodiversity conservation goals. We define the Level of Protection⁶ of an area using *The MPA Guide*. Currently, implemented MPAs from OOC commitments that are Fully or Highly Protected cover 0.95% of the ocean (Figure 5). If all OOC-committed MPAs were implemented, an additional 0.18% of the ocean would be inside areas that are Fully or Highly Protected. If we add this Fully or Highly Protected area to the current global total of these areas⁷, that means 3.0% of the ocean would be Fully or Highly Protected.

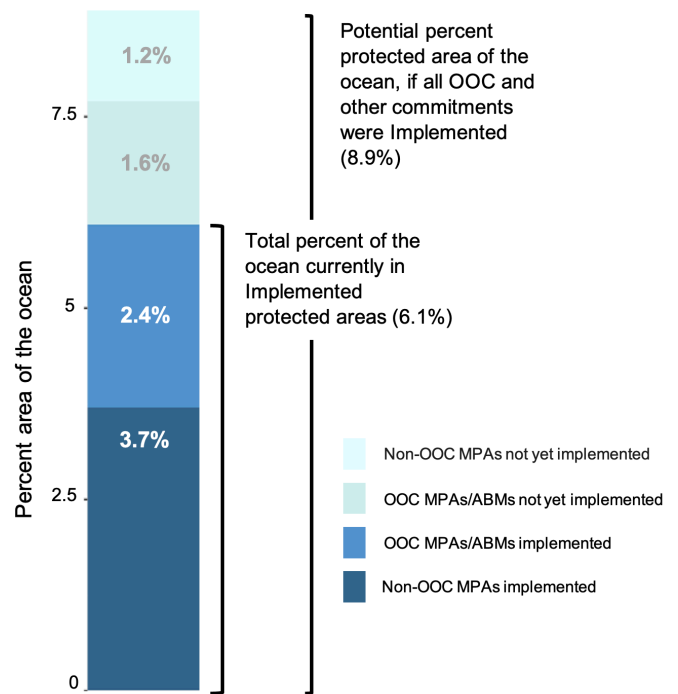
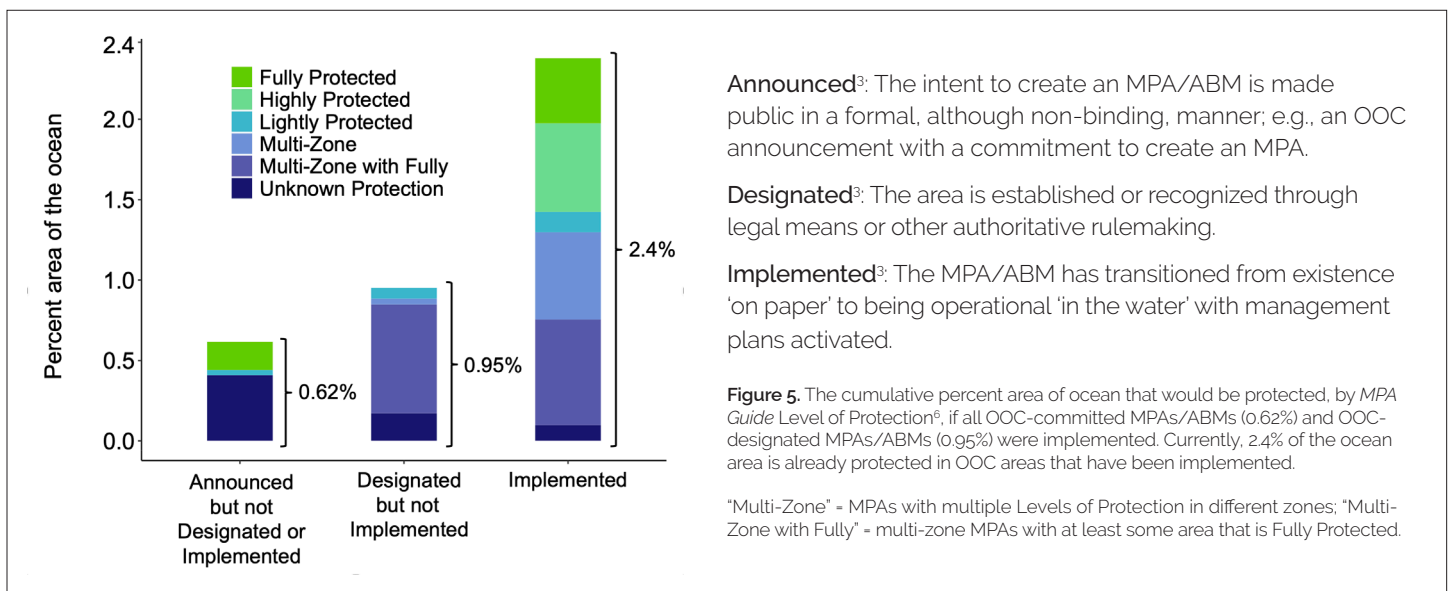


Figure 4. Cumulative percent area of the ocean protected in implemented MPAs/ABMs⁵ (non-OOC and OOC) and the total ocean area globally that would be protected if the remaining OOC-committed and other committed MPAs were implemented (8.9%).

- Most of the remaining announced or designated MPAs are slated for lower Levels of Protection, or their planned protection level is unknown. Per *The MPA Guide*, Full and High protection are most likely to provide significant benefits for biodiversity conservation, fisheries enhancement, and resilience to climate change (Figure 5).



Announced³: The intent to create an MPA/ABM is made public in a formal, although non-binding, manner; e.g., an OOC announcement with a commitment to create an MPA.

Designated³: The area is established or recognized through legal means or other authoritative rulemaking.

Implemented³: The MPA/ABM has transitioned from existence 'on paper' to being operational 'in the water' with management plans activated.

Figure 5. The cumulative percent area of ocean that would be protected, by *MPA Guide* Level of Protection⁶, if all OOC-committed MPAs/ABMs (0.62%) and OOC-designated MPAs/ABMs (0.95%) were implemented. Currently, 2.4% of the ocean area is already protected in OOC areas that have been implemented.

"Multi-Zone" = MPAs with multiple Levels of Protection in different zones; "Multi-Zone with Fully" = multi-zone MPAs with at least some area that is Fully Protected.

⁵ Percent of the ocean in all implemented MPAs (OOC and non-OOC) is 6.1%, as of January 2022: <https://mpAtlas.org/>

⁶ As per *The MPA Guide*. **Fully Protected** means no extractive or destructive activities are allowed; all abatable impacts are minimized. **Highly Protected** means only light extractive activities with low total impact are allowed, such as low-impact cultural and traditional activities such as sustainable fishing by Indigenous communities, with all other abatable impacts minimized. **Lightly Protected** means some protection of biodiversity exists but moderate to significant extraction and other impacts are allowed. **Minimally Protected** means that extensive extraction and other impacts are allowed, but the site still provides some conservation benefit in the area (Grorud-Colvert *et al.* 2021).

⁷ Percent of the ocean in all implemented MPAs (OOC and non-OOC) that are Fully and Highly Protected is 2.8%, as of January 2022: <https://mpAtlas.org/>

C. ACTIONS FROM THE OOC HAVE HAD GLOBAL RESULTS.

1. As noted above, MPAs and ABMs resulting from OOC commitments represent an impressive 40% of the current total area of the ocean in *implemented* MPAs.
2. If the remaining OOC-committed MPAs and ABMs were actually *implemented*, the OOC commitments alone would protect 4.0% of the ocean. Although many OOC-announced MPAs are implemented, still more are only committed or designated and not yet implemented and active in the water (Figure 6). If all currently committed MPAs were implemented, the total protected area of the ocean would rise to 8.9%.
3. If all Fully or Highly Protected MPA commitments from the OOC were completed, one third of all committed MPAs or 3.0% of the ocean would be Fully/Highly Protected. This total area could be even greater if the OOC commitments that have yet to be completed and have no specified protection level were established as Fully or Highly Protected.
4. Thirty-three percent of the OOC MPA and other ABM commitments have yet to be fulfilled. Nearly all (31%) show at least some evidence of progress, and the other 2% are actions with completion dates in the future. It is clear that more work is needed to realize the full potential of the OOC and achieve meaningful ocean protection.

Our Ocean Conference MPA & ABM Commitments (2014-2019)

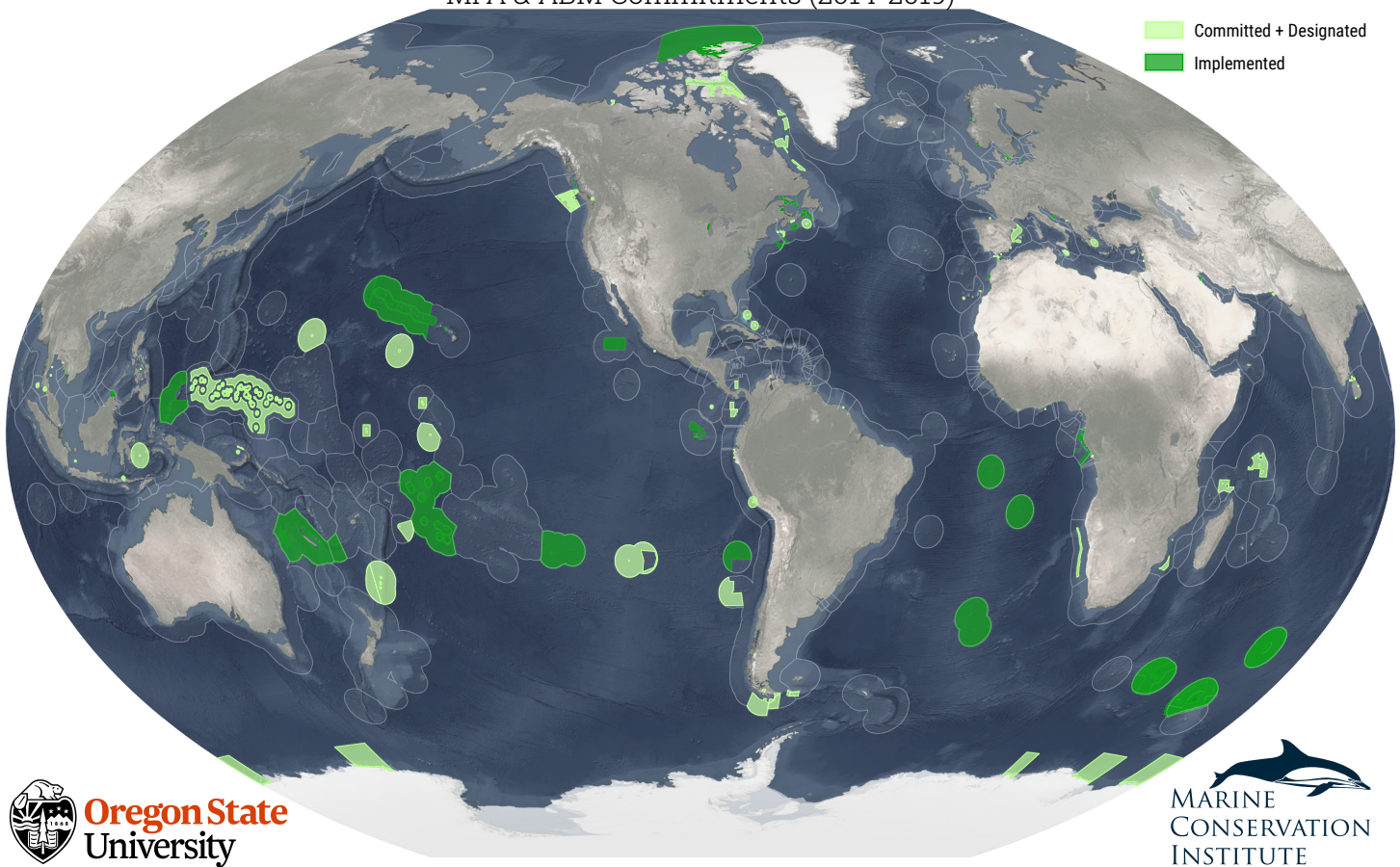


Figure 6. MPA and other ABMs that have been committed via announcements at OOCs and have been implemented (dark green) or are still in progress and are not yet implemented and active on the water (light green). Biodiversity conservation benefits, including both social and ecological outcomes, can not begin to accrue until an area is implemented. These light green areas should remain a focus for additional resources and capacity support to complete the commitment to protect the area.



Recommendations to enhance accountability

Conducting this analysis has not been straightforward or quick. It entailed contacting each country or organization making the original commitment and requesting documents that verify the status of the pledged action. An online reporting tool exists for the Our Ocean Conferences, but it does not provide either sufficient information or verifiable evidence that would enable the kind of reporting presented in this analysis. For the OOCs to truly 'walk the talk' of accountability, the following steps should be taken.

- 1. Create and support an updated clear, useful, and usable online reporting tool to track progress on all ocean commitments.** Reporting and verifying progress made on each commitment is essential for accountability. Self-reporting requirements must achieve the dual goals of being (a) clear and simple (to encourage compliance and accuracy), but also (b) sufficiently information-rich and verifiable (to ensure collection of useful, useable, and robust information that can be independently validated). An essential feature must be the ability to upload documents or provide links to sources that provide proof of progress. The tracking tool should require basic information; for example, who is responsible for implementation of the action, the location of the MPA, its size, and its protection level.
 - a. Require that new commitments be sufficiently specific to facilitate tracking progress and evaluating completion.** For example, MPA/ABM commitments should specify a planned Level of Protection.
 - b. Provide guidance for making new commitments.** For example, commitments should specify an intended date of completion.
- 2. Support progress so actions don't stall on the road to completion.** Despite the fact that 67% of actions are complete, more work remains to be done to achieve the potential of the pledges made and the commitment to accountability. An annual update on each in-progress action will help with momentum needed for continued progress. Steps could be taken to identify and support actions that are at risk of stalling due to lack of technical or financial resources, e.g., staffing or monitoring budgets.
- 3. Ensure that all MPAs and other ABMs are participatory, inclusive, resourced, enforced, monitored, and adaptively managed so they can be effective and achieve their intended results.** Implementing an MPA or other ABM is just the beginning. To be effective and achieve their goals, MPAs/ABMs need to have key enabling conditions as outlined in *The MPA Guide*, including inclusive, equitable, and evidence-based decision-making based on clear goals, adequate financing and staffing, good compliance, and enforcement. Monitoring and adaptive management help to evaluate if they are meeting the objectives of the protected area so these can be adjusted accordingly.
- 4. Celebrate completed actions with a high-profile reporting at each OOC.** Continued attention to progress inspires more progress and a community spirit of accountability. The OOCs provide a golden opportunity to highlight and celebrate successes publicly. The OOCs should be more than a forum for making announcements; they should also be a forum for celebrating progress and success, and a tool to identify additional steps or resources to ensure that all actions can be successful.
- 5. Use the success of this high-profile meeting to create momentum for the full range of meaningful, effective ocean actions needed.** Our analysis focused only on one of six thematic areas: MPAs/ABMs. Analyses and tracking of other themes is also needed: achieving sustainable fisheries and other extractive uses, eliminating illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to climate change and ocean acidification, and identifying adequate financing. The community of ocean champions who constitute the OOC leaders should constantly challenge themselves to use the OOC to track progress on all announcements and achieve meaningful outcomes.

Quick Reference: Recommendations

Based on these findings, we recommend the following actions to those who have made and will make commitments, and to current and future OOC hosts. These recommendations are in the spirit of strengthening accountability and promoting effective actions toward healthy, productive, and resilient ocean ecosystems that can support sustainable uses of the ocean:

1. Commit to an updated, clear, useful, and usable online tracking tool for reporting progress on OOC commitments.
2. Support progress so actions don't stall on the road to completion.
3. Ensure that all MPAs and other ABMs are participatory, inclusive, resourced, enforced, monitored, and adaptively managed so they can be effective and achieve the intended results.
4. Celebrate completed actions with a high-profile reporting at each subsequent OOC.
5. Use the success of this high-profile meeting to create momentum for the full range of meaningful, effective ocean actions needed. These include sustainable fisheries and other extractive uses; serious attention to illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing; significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions; and smart strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change and ocean acidification.



Conclusions

The Our Ocean Conference has already made an outsized contribution to improving the health of the ocean and the wellbeing of billions of people. Our analysis suggests that the OOCs have been somewhat to highly successful in achieving some of their goals:

- Elevate the ocean on the international diplomacy stage (highly successful);
- Broaden ownership for ocean action across sectors (moderately successful);
- Increase financial, technical, technological, and partnership resources devoted to ocean action (moderately successful);

- Protect and restore the health of the ocean and use it sustainably (somewhat successful);
- Be accountable for commitments made (moderately successful).
- The OOC has an even greater potential to make substantial contributions if future hosts continue to promote inclusivity, ambitious goals, and accountability. Slight but important adjustments to the tracking registry will enhance the tracking of and accountability for commitments.

Quick Reference: Conclusions

As a result of the OOCs, substantial progress has been made in ocean protection. At the same time, key commitments have yet to be finalized. We underscore the urgency of accurate tracking and reporting if the OOCs are to live up to their promise of delivering meaningful ocean action. More specifically, in the MPA and ABM category:

1. OOCs have been somewhat to highly successful in achieving their goals, to:
 - Elevate the ocean on the international diplomacy stage (highly successful);
 - Broaden ownership for ocean action across sectors (moderately successful);
 - Increase financial, technical, technological, and partnership resources devoted to ocean action (moderately successful);
 - Protect and restore the health of the ocean and use it sustainably (somewhat successful);
 - Be accountable for commitments made (moderately successful).
2. The very public focus on accountability for the OOCs seems to be paying off. Sixty-seven percent of all MPA commitments have been completed. The rest show evidence of progress given their intended date of completion (31%). Attention must now be paid to ensuring that commitments are completed.
3. OOC MPA commitments are having an impact. As a direct result of OOC MPA commitments, 2.4% of the ocean – over 8.6 million km² – has now been

implemented as MPAs or ABMs (not just promised, but delivered, with on-the-water changes in protection). OOC-pledged and implemented MPAs and ABMs are responsible for 40% of the global area of implemented MPAs and ABMs in the ocean.

4. Currently implemented MPAs from OOC commitments that are Fully or Highly Protected cover 0.95% of the ocean. If all OOC-committed MPAs were implemented, an additional 0.18% of the ocean would be inside areas that are Fully or Highly Protected. See *The MPA Guide* for definitions of Levels of Protection (Grorud-Colvert *et al.* 2021 Science).
5. If all OOC MPA/ABM commitments were implemented, 4.0% of the ocean – over 14 million km² – would be protected by OOC commitments. Implementing already-committed MPAs worldwide would bring the total amount of ocean protection to 8.9%.
6. Furthermore, a total of 3.0% of the ocean would be Fully or Highly Protected if all OOC commitments were completed. This would enable progress not only towards percentage targets but also their underlying goals of effectiveness towards delivering positive outcomes for biodiversity conservation and human wellbeing.
7. The OOCs continue to represent an important, high-profile forum for inspiring and celebrating progress, as well as raising global motivation to meet even more ambitious targets. The OOCs thus have the potential to make an even greater impact on achieving a “30x30” target, if adopted, to protect at least 30% of the ocean by 2030.

Acknowledgements

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