FROM A RIPPLE OF HOPE TO WAVES OF CHANGE: AN INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT of OUR OCEAN CONFERENCE MPA and OTHER AREA-BASED CONSERVATION COMMITMENTS

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Side Event on OOC Accountability Convened by the Government of Norway, the Government of Palau, the Ocean Policy Research Institute of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, and the Institute of Marine Research, Norway to review the fate of past OOC commitments and consider ways to enhance accountability for current and future commitments

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An Independent Test of OOC Accountability

A hallmark of the Our Ocean Conferences (OOCs) has been a strong commitment to accountability for announcements made at the conference. We conducted an in-depth, independent assessment of progress on pledges made in the "MPAs and other area-based conservation measures (ABMs)" category (one of six thematic topics) at the five OOCs. These 206 MPA and ABM announcements constituted 20% of all OOC announcements. Some announcements included multiple actions, and we evaluated all 288 individual actions.

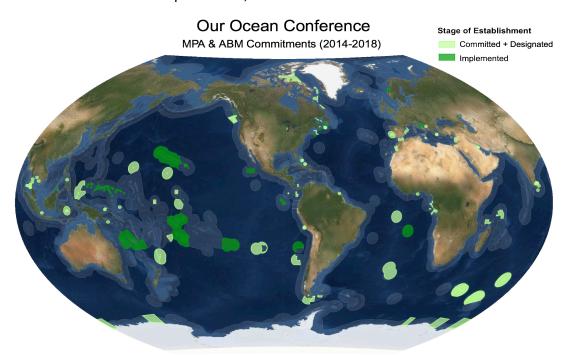


Figure 1. Of the 189 MPAs and ABMs announced at OOCs, 43 have been implemented (dark green; totals > 6 million km² or 1.7% of the global ocean); 146 have been promised or legally designated, but not yet implemented (light green; totals > 7 million km2, or 1.9% of the ocean). The area in OOC implemented MPAs accounts for one third of the total area of all implemented MPAs.

Updating our earlier assessment of the first four OOCs², we sought concrete evidence to evaluate the current status of each of the 288 actions from all five OOCs, 2014-2018. Here we summarize our findings. For example, one type of action pledged was to create or expand an MPA or ABM. Figure 1 shows progress toward implementation³ of the 189 new or expanded MPAs and ABMs announced at OOCs. Twenty-three per cent have been implemented to date.

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² Kirsten Grorud-Colvert, Vanessa Constant, Jenna Sullivan, Katherine Dziedzic, Sara L. Hamilton, Zachary Randell, Heather Fulton-Bennett, Zechariah D. Meunier, Silke Bachhuber, Alissa J. Rickborn, Barbara Spiecker, and Jane Lubchenco. 2018. High-profile international commitments for ocean protection: Empty promises or meaningful progress? *Marine Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.04.003

³ Oregon State University, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, Marine Conservation Institute, National Geographic Society, and UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (2019) An Introduction to The MPA Guide. https://www.protectedplanet.net/c/mpa-guide

Conclusions

Substantial progress has been made in ocean protection as a result of the OOCs. 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. More than half of all MPA commitments (57%) have been completed; most of the rest show some progress (40%). Only three percent of MPA actions showed no evidence of progress, and their intended completion years are still in the future. Attention must now be paid to ensuring that the rest of the commitments are completed.
- 3. OOC MPA commitments are having an impact. As a direct result of OOC MPA commitments, 1.7% of the ocean over 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 one-third of the global area of implemented MPAs and ABMs.
- 4. Nearly *half* of those OOC-promised and now-implemented MPAs (by number) are Fully or Highly Protected (16 MPA actions); the remainder are Lightly to Minimally protected (18 MPA actions). About ¼ of the area in OOC implemented MPAs is Fully or Highly Protected. (See *The MPA Guide*³ for definitions of Levels of Protection.)
- 5. If all OOC MPA/ABM commitments were implemented, 3.6% of the ocean over 13 million km² would be protected by OOC commitments. This would more than double the area in implemented MPAs globally. Furthermore, 1.2% would be Fully or Highly Protected. The OOCs thus have the potential to make an even greater impact on achieving the 10% by 2020 targets.

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 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. Support progress so actions don't stall on the road to completion.
- 2. Ensure that all MPAs and ABMs are resourced, enforced, monitored, and adaptively managed so they can be effective and achieve the intended results.
- 3. Support a clear, information-rich, verifiable, and accessible online reporting tool to track progress on ocean commitments.
- 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 adapt to climate change and ocean acidification.

Findings

A. What commitments were made and who made them?

- 1. HOW MANY ACTIONS? A total of 1,021 announcements were made across all six OOC themes, with 20% of these announced in the MPA and ABM theme (206 announcements). Many included more than one action, so we evaluated all 288 separate actions.
- 2. WHO? 62 countries and 69 other organizations (intergovernmental bodies, industry, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), philanthropies, and universities) made OOC MPA or ABM commitments. Governments contributed 75% of all MPA/ABM actions.
- **3. CHANGES THROUGH TIME**: The numbers, sectors, and types of MPA announcements increased substantially over time. The number of actions at least doubled each year from 7 in 2014 to 111 in 2017 (a greater than 15-fold increase) then decreased to 85 in 2018.
- **4. KINDS OF ACTIONS:** Across all five OOCs, new protected areas (116 actions) accounted for 40% of MPA/ABM actions; financial commitments (75) 26%; policies (38) 13%; and partnerships (18) 6%. Other categories accounted for the remaining 14%.

B. Have the commitments resulted in action? Have they been completed?

- 1. To the best of our knowledge, 57% of all OOC MPA/ABM actions have been completed; 40% show at least some evidence of progress (Figure 2). There is insufficient information to evaluate the remaining 3%, but note that their completion dates are in the future (Figures 2 and 3). In summary, 57% are complete and 43% are incomplete.
- 2. Nearly half of MPA/ABM actions (124 out of 288) were pledges to create a new or expand an existing MPA or ABM. The vast majority (98) were for MPAs; 26 were for ABMs.
- 3. Across all 124 MPA and ABM actions, a total of 189 individual MPA and ABMs were announced. Of these, 23% have been *implemented* (43), and they cover over 6 million km² or 1.7% of the ocean (Figure 4). Seventy-seven percent of pledged MPAs or ABMs have yet to be implemented.
- 4. Of the currently *implemented*MPAs, 0.8% is either Fully or Highly
 Protected (Figure 4). If all MPAs
 were implemented, 1.2% would be
 Fully or Highly Protected. As noted
 in *The MPA Guide*³, those two levels
 of protection provide significantly
 greater benefits to biodiversity
 conservation, long-term benefit to
 fisheries, and resilience to climate
 change.

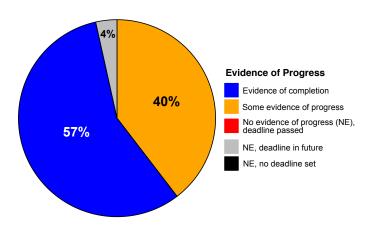
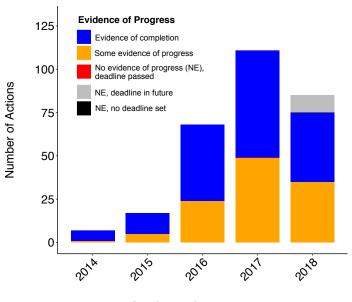


Figure 2. Progress made on all 288 MPA/ABM actions pledged at the five Our Ocean Conferences. Each action was assigned to one of five progress categories based on the evidence found for that action.



Our Ocean Conference Year

Figure 3. The status of progress made on all 288 MPA/ABM actions announced by year announced (2014–2018) at the Our Ocean Conference. Each action was assigned to one of five progress categories based on the evidence found for that action.

5. If all of the OOC MPA and ABM announcements were implemented, they would cover 3.6% of the ocean (13,048,133 km²), and thus double the area of implemented MPAs/ABMs globally (Figures 4 and 5).

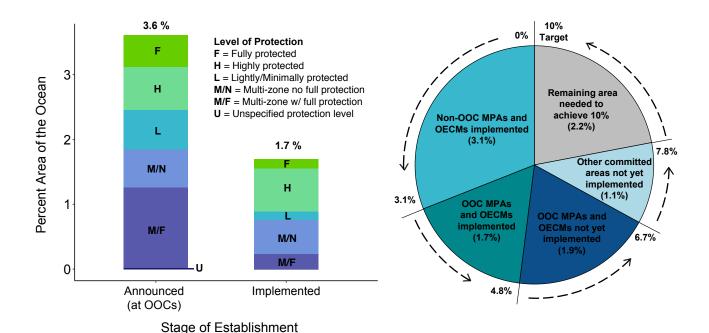


Figure 4. The cumulative percent area of the ocean that would be protected if all OOC-announced MPAs and ABMs were implemented (3.6%), compared to the current percent of the ocean that is already protected in OOC-announced areas that have been implemented (1.7%) (110 total actions with a known area amount).

Figure 5. The OOC announcements on MPAs and ABMs are adding significantly to global progress toward the 10% targets. All implemented MPAs and ABMs worldwide (OOC and non-OOC) totals 4.8%. Implementing the remaining (OOC and non-OOC) commitments worldwide will protect 7.8% of the ocean.

C. What has been the result of these actions and the OOC?

- **1.** As noted above, MPAs and ABMs resulting from OOC announcements represent an impressive one-third of the current total area of the ocean in *implemented* MPAs.
- 2. If the additional 1.9% OOC MPAs and ABMs that have been committed but not yet implemented were actually *implemented* and added to the current 4.8% of the ocean in implemented areas, the total protected area of the ocean would rise to 6.7% (Figure 5).

3. Forty-three percent of the OOC MPA and ABM promises have yet to be fulfilled. Forty percent show at least some evidence of progress and 3% show no evidence of progress, although their completion dates are in the future. It is clear that more work is needed to realize the full potential of the OOC and achieve meaningful ocean protection.

Recommendations to enhance accountability

- 1. Support progress so actions don't stall on the road to completion. Despite the fact that 57% of actions are complete and another 40% show at least some progress, it is clear that much work remains to be done to achieve the potential of the pledges made and the commitment to accountability. An annual check-in on actions that are in progress will help keep attention on the need for continued progress. Steps could be taken to identify when an action is at risk of stalling and in need of further resources and support.
- 2. Ensure that all MPAs and ABMs are resourced, enforced, monitored, and adaptively managed so they can be effective and achieve the intended results. Implementing an MPA or ABM is just the beginning. To be effective and achieve their goals, MPAs and ABMs need to have adequate financing and staffing, good compliance and enforcement, monitoring and adaptive management to evaluate if they are meeting the objectives of the protected area, and if not, to adjust accordingly.
- 3. Support a clear, information-rich, verifiable, and accessible online reporting tool to track progress on ocean commitments. Reporting and verification of 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), 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 inclusion of a mechanism 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? Where is the MPA? How large it is? What activities are allowed or prohibited?
- 4. Celebrate completed actions with a high-profile reporting at each OOC. Continued attention to progress made inspires more progress. The OOCs provide a golden opportunity to highlight, praise, and celebrate successes publicly. The OOCs should be more than a forum for making announcements; they should also be a forum for celebrating actions that are completed and working together 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, including sustainable fisheries and other extractive uses, serious attention to illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, smart strategies to adapt to climate change and ocean acidification, and adequate financing. The MPA and ABM theme is just one of multiple themes focused on ocean solutions at the OOCs, with the opportunity for big and bold benefits to the ocean and all people. The community of ocean leaders who constitute the OOC leaders should constantly continue to challenge themselves to use the OOC to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Conclusions

The Our Ocean Conference has already made an outsized contribution to improve the health of the ocean and the well-being of billions of people. The OOC has an even greater potential to make substantial future contributions if slight adjustments are made to enhance the tracking of and accountability for commitments, and if future hosts continue to promote inclusivity, ambitious goals, and accountability.

Acknowledgements

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