

2025: Bearing fruit..?

*Polar bear in Southern Labrador Pack Ice Whelping Area IMMA.
Image courtesy Dave Mckinnon.*

Despite notable setbacks, including an unravelling Plastics Treaty and renewed climate change denial, the first quarter of 2025 heralds significant opportunities to conserve and protect the ocean. In this newsletter we bring together updates and details of new initiatives associated with positive efforts to turn the tide, including the prospect of a new major project for GOBI.

First, thanks to successful negotiations at CBD COP16, the EBSA process has the opportunity to consolidate and move forward (p4). This is supported by Sustainable Ocean Initiative efforts towards attaining GBF Target 3 (p27) and likely future national workshops to modify and describe new EBSAs. DOALOS continues to support States working to ratify the BBNJ Agreement - both through dedicated regional capacity building workshops and gearing up to the first meeting of the BBNJ Preparatory Commission in April 2025 (p2).

Second, GOBI Partners continue their involvement to secure best available science to underpin and inform ocean policy.

This is a major undertaking: proponents must be both innovative and engaged for the long haul. We feature several examples of on-going work: the recent joint GOBI-HSSG workshop on ecologically representative networks (p8); the Seabird Tracking Database celebrates 20 years (p10); 43 new IMMAs go live (p15); the Sargasso Sea pioneers the first High Seas GEF-funded LME Project (page 16), and in the Antarctic an MPA Research Coordination Network has been established for the Ross Sea (p20).

Finally, success breeds success! The taxa-specific significant areas community continues to consolidate and expand. ISRAs (p24) and IMTAs (p13) are both gaining traction and momentum, improving understanding and baseline evidence for these endangered marine species.

Sincere thanks and congratulations to everyone involved with taking forward this important work.

Update on the BBNJ Agreement

By Charlotte Salpin, DOALOS

The adoption, by consensus, of the *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction* (BBNJ Agreement), on 19 June 2023, was hailed as a historical achievement in collective efforts to ensure the health and resilience of the ocean and a great victory for multilateralism.

The BBNJ Agreement is open for signature from 20 September 2023 to 20 September 2025 and will enter into force 120 days after the date of the deposit of the 60th instrument of ratification, approval, acceptance or accession. As of [17 January 2025](#), the Agreement had 106 signatories, 15 of which have already ratified it.

Pursuant to the BBNJ Agreement and United Nations General Assembly [resolution 77/321 of 1 August 2023](#), the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea of the Office of Legal Affairs of the United Nations (DOALOS) currently serves as the interim secretariat for the Agreement until the secretariat to be established thereunder commences its functions.

In response to that resolution, DOALOS has developed a programme of activities to promote a better understanding of the BBNJ Agreement and prepare for its entry into force. As part of that programme, in 2024, DOALOS undertook a variety of capacity-building and outreach activities, including, among others:

- The delivery of five [regional workshops](#) for the a) Pacific, b) North-East and South-East Asia, c) Caribbean small island developing States, d) Latin America, and e) Atlantic

and Mediterranean coasts of Africa;

- The organisation of dozens of online [briefings](#) and side events;
- The launch of a new [website for the BBNJ Agreement](#);
- The publication of [factsheets](#) on the BBNJ Agreement;
- The development, in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme, of an [online introductory course](#) on the BBNJ Agreement.

Also as part of that programme, DOALOS is implementing an EU-funded project for the “Promotion of a better understanding of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement), in particular to strengthen capacities of developing States toward becoming parties to the BBNJ Agreement and implementing it”.

In performing the functions assigned to it under relevant General Assembly resolutions, and drawing on its role as focal point, with the United Nations Legal Counsel, of UN Oceans, DOALOS aims to facilitate inter-agency coordination and cooperation within the UN system in activities supporting the entry into force and implementation of the BBNJ Agreement, with a view to avoiding duplication of efforts and ensuring the efficient use of the resources available. Likewise, outside the UN system, DOALOS is seeking to build partnerships and synergies with relevant global and regional organisations, civil society, academia and the private sector.

In 2025, DOALOS will continue its activities in support of efforts by States towards becoming party to the BBNJ Agreement and preparing for its entry into force.

A major step in the preparations for the entry into force of the Agreement was the adoption of General Assembly [resolution 78/272 of 24 April 2024](#), which established a Preparatory Commission to prepare for the entry into force of the BBNJ Agreement and the convening of the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Agreement.

As mandated by the General Assembly, the Commission held a three-day organisational meeting at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 24-26 June 2024. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss organisational matters, including the election of the Co-Chairs and a Bureau of the Commission, the dates of the meetings of the Commission and the programme of work of the Commission.

The meeting elected Ms Janine Coyo-Felson of Belize and Mr Adam McCarthy of Australia as Co-Chairs of the Commission. It also elected a Bureau of the Commission composed of 15 members. The meeting further decided that the Commission would meet for at least two sessions in 2025, including 14-25 April and 18-29 August 2025, and for at least one session in 2026 (date to be determined). The General Assembly endorsed that decision on 13 August 2024. In addition, the Preparatory Commission decided to request the Co-Chairs, in consultation with the Bureau, to prepare the provisional programme of work of the Preparatory Commission on the basis of three clusters of issues extensively discussed during the meeting and on the understanding that matters to be addressed by the Conference of the Parties at its first meeting as expressly set out in the Agreement would be given priority in the work of the Commission. The outcomes of this three-day organisational meeting are recorded in document [A/AC.296/2024/4](#), entitled “Statement of the co-Chair of the Preparatory Commission at the closing of the organizational meeting”. The annex to that document includes the three clusters of issues to be addressed by the Commission, namely:

1. Governance issues:

- Rules of procedure for the Conference of the Parties;
- Terms of reference and modalities for the operation of, and rules of procedure for, the subsidiary bodies established under the Agreement;
- Selection process for the members of the Scientific and Technical Body and the other subsidiary bodies established under the Agreement;
- Arrangements for the functioning of the secretariat, including its seat;
- Reporting requirements;

- Arrangements to enhance cooperation with relevant legal instruments and frameworks and relevant global, regional, subregional and sectoral bodies.

2. Issues pertaining to the operation of Clearing-House Mechanism:

- Modalities for the operation of the Clearing-House Mechanism, such as:
 - a) Type, architecture and functionalities of the platform;
 - b) Process for generating the “BBNJ” standardised batch identifier;
 - c) Modalities to facilitate the matching of capacity-building needs with the support available and with providers for the transfer of marine technology, and to facilitate access to related know-how and expertise;
 - d) Terms of cooperation with relevant legal instruments and frameworks and relevant global, regional, subregional and sectoral bodies.

3. Financial rules, and financial resources and mechanism:

- Financial rules governing the funding of the Conference of the Parties and the funding of the secretariat and any subsidiary bodies;
- Arrangements with the Global Environment Facility to give effect to the relevant provisions on funding;
- Operationalisation of other provisions on financial resources and mechanism, such as:
 - a) Establishment of the voluntary trust fund as part of the financial mechanism established under the Agreement;
 - b) Arrangements to give effect to provisions on the special fund, including in relation to application and approval procedures;
 - c) Scale of assessed contributions.

In follow-up to the organisational meeting of the Commission, the Co-Chairs in consultation with the Bureau and with the assistance of DOALOS, prepared an [agenda for the Preparatory Commission](#) and a [provisional programme of work](#) of the Preparatory Commission, which identifies the issues to be considered by the Commission at its first two sessions in 2024 and its third session to be held in 2026.

Information on the Preparatory Commission, including documents for the sessions, as well as the DOALOS programme of activities to promote a better understanding of the Agreement is available on the website of the BBNJ Agreement.

Enhanced Role for the EBSA Informal Advisory Group (IAG-EBSA)

By David Johnson, GOBI Coordinator and IAG-EBSA member

Revised terms of reference are a key outcome of the latest meeting of the CBD's Informal Advisory Group on EBSAs (IAG-EBSA), held online in January 2025. The meeting updated the group with an overview of the negotiations and outcomes of CBD COP16 on EBSAs (Decision 16/16), which included the new modalities for the EBSA process adopted by the COP and related scientific and technical issues.

Despite a clear rationale for modifying EBSAs (including new data becoming available, correction of errors, changing baselines) and describing new EBSAs (gaps in coverage, confidence constraints due to limited information, interface with other complementary intergovernmental processes), unresolved negotiations on modalities have hampered the credibility and utility of the EBSA process since 2016. Discussions to address this have evolved through global expert workshops and most specifically the COP16 negotiations, which focused on:

- dynamics of the EBSA regional workshops
- modalities for the information-sharing mechanism
- reasons for modification of EBSAs in national jurisdiction
- where archives of previous versions of modified EBSAs are held.

Greater clarity has now been given to incorporation of outputs from national processes. A new mechanism is in place to describe EBSAs, including a 6-month comment period for peer review. This comes at a critically important time in light of upcoming meetings on the BBNJ Agreement, and future EBSA workshops will no longer be limited to participation by coastal States. Emphasis has been placed on collaboration, avoidance of jurisdictional concerns (a mechanism sets out how to process objections should any dispute arise), scientific rigour and transparency, and regional dimensions when developing submissions.

Furthermore, the decision makes it clear that:

- In areas beyond national jurisdiction any State(s), individually or collectively, including through competent intergovernmental organisations, can submit a modification or description. To consider these proposals, workshops must be held.
- In areas within national jurisdiction the modification or description can only be proposed by the State within whose jurisdiction the proposal falls (including consent to proposals that partially include areas within national jurisdiction); a workshop is optional.

The IAG-EBSA will advise the Secretariat on the possible scope of forthcoming EBSA workshops on the basis of submissions received, considering inter alia:

- size and number of submissions
- balance of ABNJ vs. national jurisdiction submissions
- features addressed by the submissions and whether they are gaps in the EBSA portfolio
- submission of new descriptions vs modification
- time since a workshop has been previously held in the region.

The decision also makes it clear that new descriptions can no longer arise during workshops.

The CBD Secretariat is working on efforts to further explain and clarify the new arrangements, including step-by-step guidance on new modalities; preparation of a notification to announce readiness to receive submissions; modifications to the EBSA website, and fundraising to support workshops. A tentative timeline before the 28th meeting of the CBD Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) envisages a regional workshop in early 2026, with submissions to be received by early summer 2025 to allow for a 6-month comment period.



COP16 delegates celebrate the successful conclusion of negotiations on EBSAs in Cali, October 2024.

A new era for GOBI: The Living High Seas project

Eighteen months on from the successful completion of GOBI's 7-year programme of work under the International Climate Initiative, a new project is on the horizon.

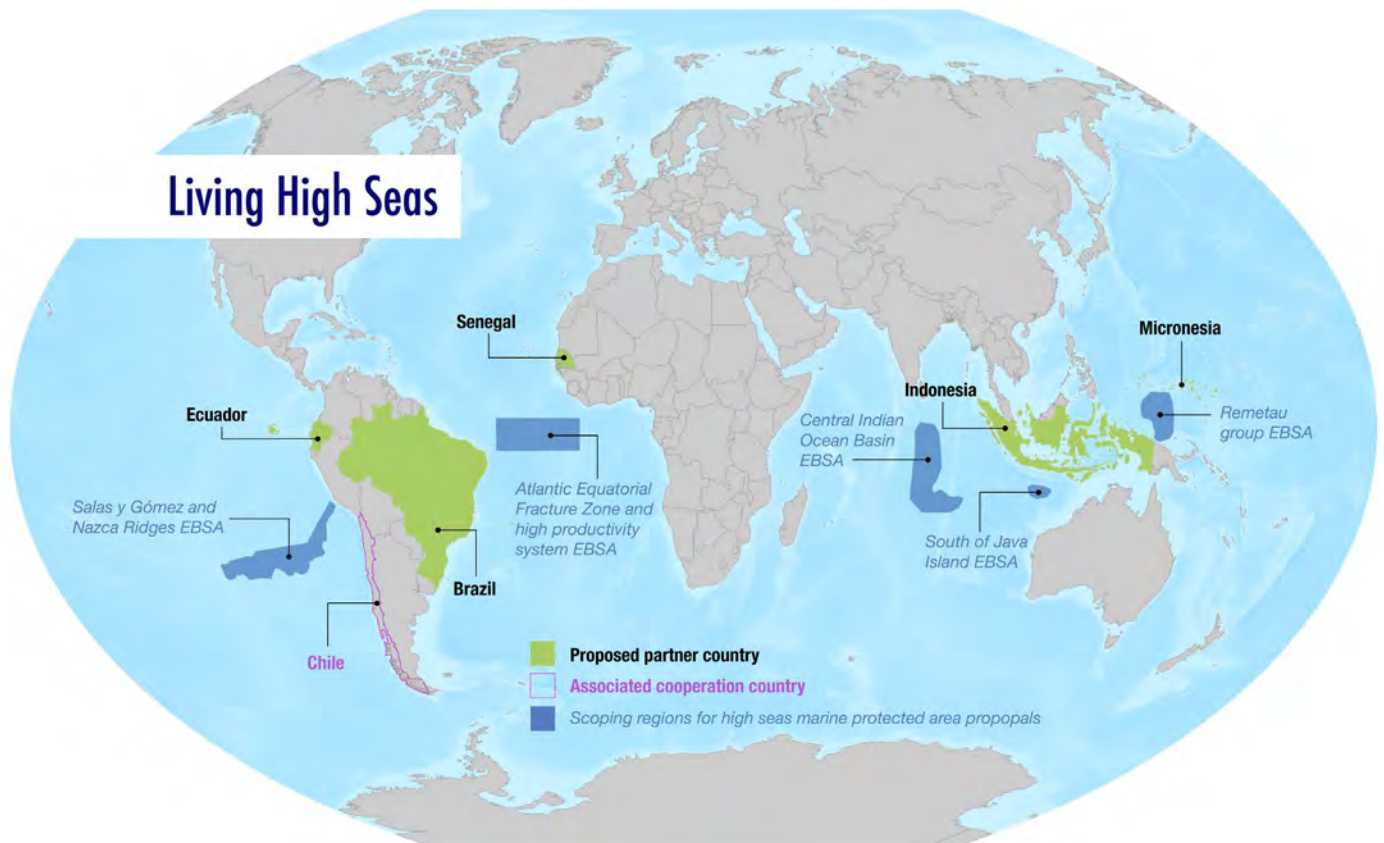
In late 2023 the German Federal Environment Ministry (BMUV) launched a call through its [International Climate Initiative](#) (IKI) for projects to support creation of protected area proposals for BBNJ. GOBI responded to the call as part of the "Living High Seas" proposal, which - following a competitive review process - was selected to go forward to project planning phase, during which a detailed proposal will be developed for a 5-year project to drive MPA proposal development in selected areas of the world's ocean.

Led by the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ) in partnership with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative (GOBI), Living High Seas brings together partnerships and networks, specialist and MPA best practice expertise, and on-the-ground capacity development experience – building on a broad portfolio and track record of science, policy, technology and knowledge interventions. National and regional cooperation partners will be engaged by the

consortium to support project implementation, with the aim to utilise and strengthen in-country expertise, leadership, mandates and competent authority roles as much as possible.

Effective protection of the global ocean is key to safeguarding our planet's natural balance. While the area covered by MPAs within national jurisdictions has increased over the years, marine areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) – which comprise about half of the planet's marine area and 64% of the ocean surface – have lacked a global and legally binding framework for establishing MPAs. This gap was closed in June 2023 when the BBNJ Agreement was adopted. Swift and focused action is now required to turn the ambitions of the BBNJ Agreement into realities, which at the same time will drive substantive progress towards achieving the 30x30 target of the CBD Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). Regionally balanced and geographically representative leadership of future BBNJ contracting parties, especially by those with emerging and developing economies located in the global south, is needed to drive the development of the first high seas MPAs under this new instrument, filling the Agreement with life.





Proposed partner countries and initial ocean target regions of the Living High Seas initiative

Partner countries

Leadership by countries that have a scientific, socio-economic and political interest in pioneering implementation of the BBNJ Agreement for specific sites is needed. At the core of Living High Seas is its coalition of proposed partner countries who seek to implement equitable conservation and sustainable use of the world's ocean resources: Brazil, Ecuador, Indonesia, Micronesia, Senegal and associated pioneers such as Chile. Living High Seas will support this cohort of forerunners in the co-development and submission of high seas MPA proposals for sites of high biodiversity and climate value in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic oceans. Following a multi-level approach and fostering south-south partnerships, partner countries will co-lead MPA development processes for specific sites within their marine regions.

Target regions

Guided by the diverse portfolio of ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs) established under the CBD, five ocean areas known for their high biodiversity and climate value have been selected in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans as broad starting points in which to seek specific potential candidate sites for area-based management tool (ABMT) proposals, including MPAs (see map).

The focus on large, scientifically complex EBSAs in the equatorial belt as a starting point is a deliberate choice: sites here are already being impacted by climate change and human activities, may merit varying protection levels, and offer leeway for application of the diverse taxonomy of ABMTs and zoning concepts involving different constellations of countries, competent authorities and support networks. These five initial ocean target regions are diverse in their characteristics and offer potential to yield a range of feature-specific sites for ABMTs, including MPAs – thus providing opportunity to develop various blueprints and best practices to foster replication around the world.

Project approach

Living High Seas directs its support primarily at partner country and intra-regional levels, complemented by inter-regional and global activities.

Partner countries will be supported in engaging a diversity of competent authorities and stakeholders at national, regional and global levels to co-develop a range of MPA proposals, as well as ABMTs, and to secure the required consensus on proposed zoning and management actions among stakeholders. As well as direct support for MPA and ABMT co-development at partner country and intra-regional

levels, Living High Seas will also provide global knowledge exchange and policy uptake activities.

The Living High Seas approach comprises three interlinked workstreams, each led by one of the three consortium partners working hand-in-hand with the partner countries and local and regional action partners:

Under Output 1 (led by GOBI), the best available scientific data, information and knowledge will be jointly compiled and processed to identify specific sites suitable for taking forward as MPA or ABMT proposals, along with associated management recommendations. This will be complemented by co-development of globally applicable quality standards for MPA and ABMT identification and proposal development.

Draft proposals generated by Output 1 will be validated under Output 2 (led by GIZ) through interaction and consultation with public and political audiences at national and regional levels to generate well supported, jointly developed MPA or ABMT proposals. Partner countries and relevant actors will create necessary regulatory frameworks for ratification (if outstanding) and implementation of the Agreement, and develop and implement suitable approaches for MPA management and governance.

Output 3 (led by IUCN) will organise knowledge transfer and exchange, enable peer-to-peer learning and ensure leaders' dialogues to stimulate collective action within and across regions and globally at multilevel fora of the high

seas-biodiversity-climate interface. This will allow scaling and replication of lessons learned, experiences gained, approaches tested and new knowledge generated from Outputs 1 and 2.

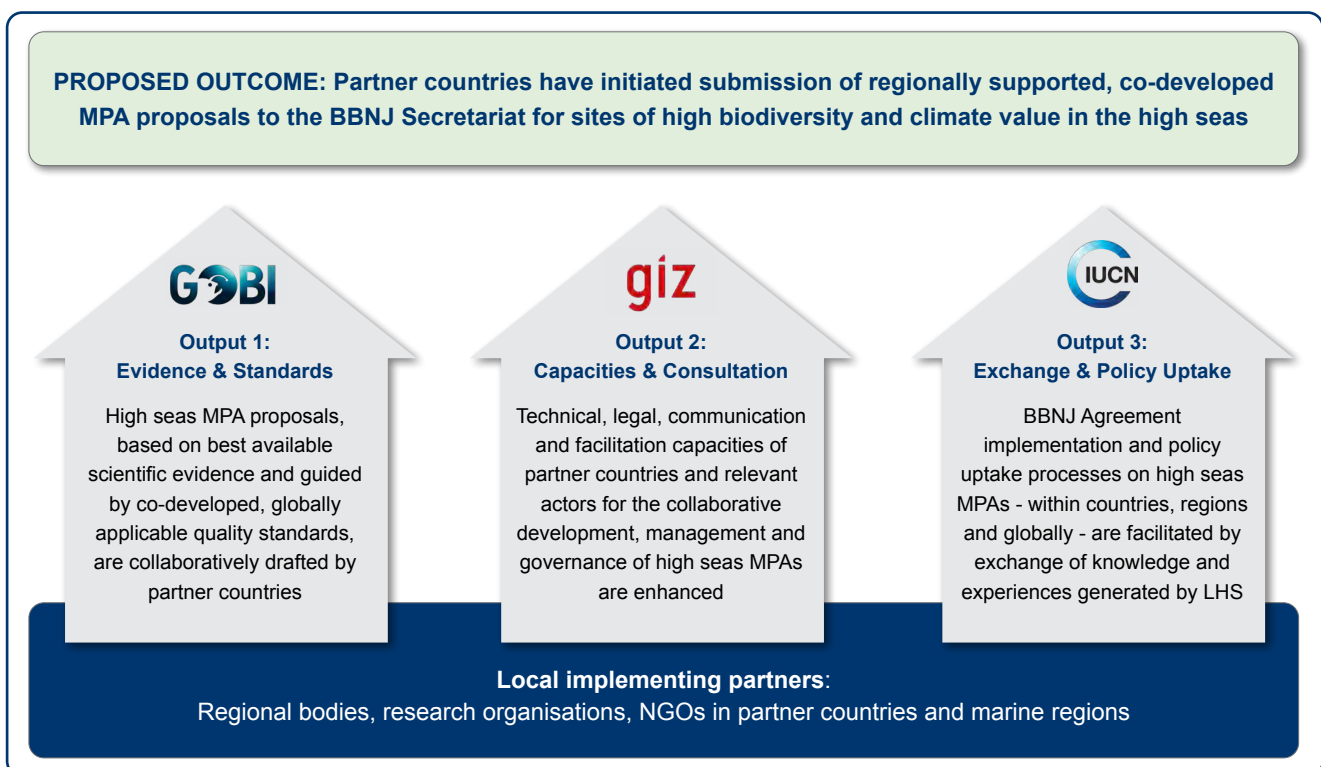
In the long term, Living High Seas will contribute to the conservation of high seas marine habitats that are particularly worthy of protection due to their high importance for biodiversity and provision of marine ecosystem and climate services. Momentum generated from high seas conservation action in multiple candidate sites will inspire uptake in other jurisdictions, ensuring that the vision of the BBNJ Agreement becomes a global reality.

Next steps

The Living High Seas project proposal has been pre-selected for funding under the International Climate Initiative. The final decision will be made following review of the full project proposal and is contingent on meeting stringent technical standards and the availability of funds. In 2025, a detailed project planning exercise will be undertaken, followed – subject to approval – by preparation for the implementation phase. If successful, the project will start in 2026 and run for five years.

For more information

For more information about Living High Seas please contact Mr Gunnar Finke at GIZ: gunnar.finke@giz.de



Schematic of the envisaged Living High Seas project approach

Building scientific foundations for ecologically representative and well-connected High Seas ABMT networks

Joint GOBI-HSSG workshop, Duke University, 12-14 March 2025

Building ecologically representative and well-connected High Seas ABMT networks was the subject of a 3-day joint GOBI-IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas High Seas Specialist Group (HSSG) workshop, which took place at Duke University on 12-14 March 2025.

Bringing together a group of around 30 experts on high seas ecology, policy and connectivity, bioregionalisation, marine protected area (MPA) network design and spatial planning, the workshop focused on three key subject areas: i) Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) network criteria, ii) the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement Annex 1 indicative criteria for area-based management tools (ABMTs), and iii) the application of bioregionalisation techniques in support of ecologically representative spatial planning in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ).

Co-chaired by David Johnson (GOBI), Guillermo Ortuño Crespo (HSSG) and Pat Halpin (Duke University), the workshop kicked off by examining the conceptual and methodological frameworks for establishing an ecologically representative and well-connected network of area-based management tools, reflecting particularly on the principles laid out in Annex II of the CBD Ecologically or Biologically Significant Areas (EBSA) Decision (UNEP/CBD/COP/DEC/IX/20). Participants reviewed scientific progress to support these network criteria since their publication in 2008, as well as their relevance for and application to implementation of the BBNJ Agreement – including innovative planning approaches to ensure robust and representative marine protection. Discussions were enriched by presentations on examples of network evaluations in South Africa (Linda Harris, NMU), the Baltic Sea (Janos Hennenke, BfN) and the North-East Atlantic (Debbie Hembury, OSPAR).



On Day 2, attention turned to refinement of draft definitions, illustrations and indicators for BBNJ Annex I criteria and best practices for understanding and using bioregionalisation in ABNJ – critical for guiding consistent, transparent, and science-based identification of these management measures, including under a changing climate, and ensuring their ecological representativity.

Participants split into breakout groups to consider each of the 22 BBNJ Annex 1 indicative criteria: concepts, existing definitions under different frameworks, examples of areas meeting individual criteria, and potential indicators. A plenary session then reflected on outcomes from the breakout groups, discussing overlaps and gaps in the current suite of criteria, the merits of hierarchy/prioritisation of criteria, and how the criteria might be operationalised during BBNJ implementation.

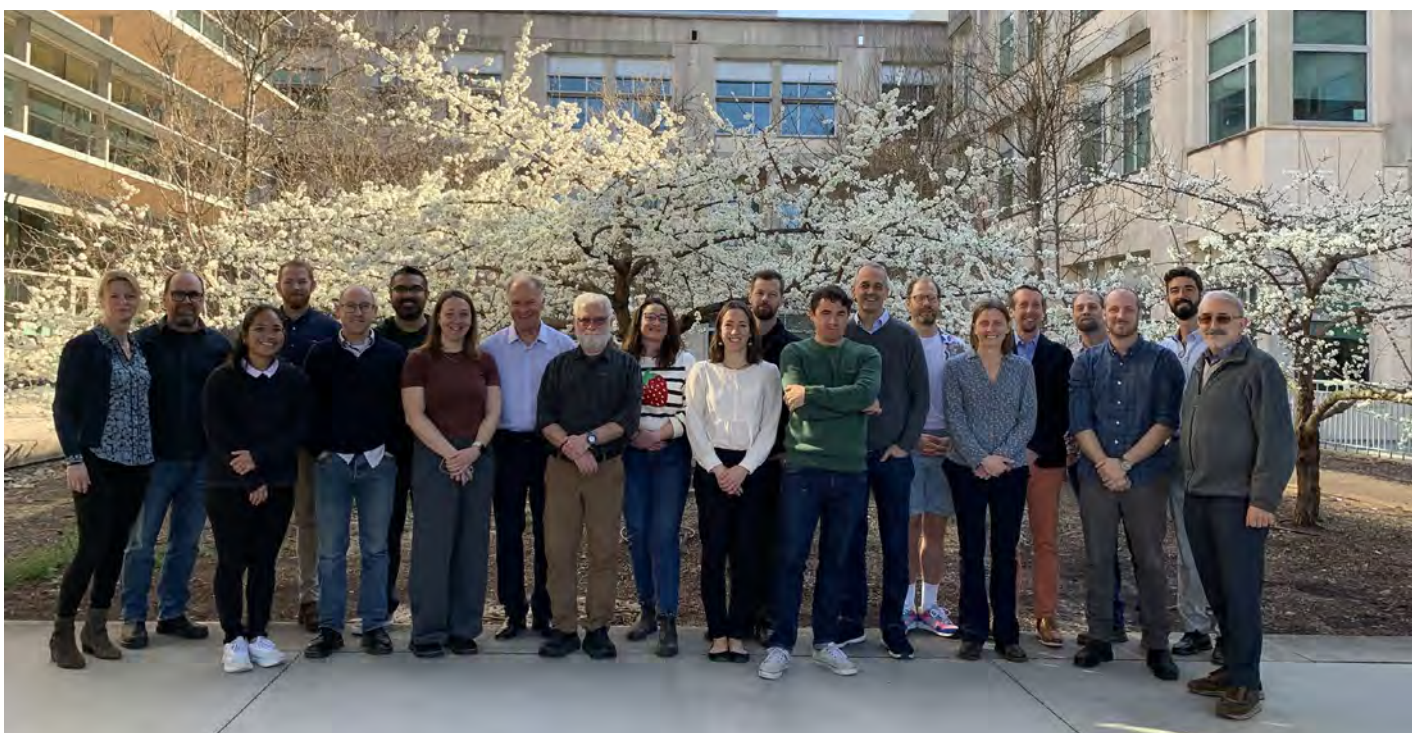
Moving on to bioregionalisation, a series of presentations highlighted existing bioregionalisation work in the Indian Ocean (Piers Dunstan and Skip Woolley, CSIRO), South Pacific (Matt Benion, NIWA), Southern Ocean (Susie Grant, BAS), and the Subantarctic Indian Ocean (Philippe Koubbi, USorbonne), whilst a presentation from Isaac Brito Morales (CI) brought vertical water column and climate considerations into the discussion. Discussions then sought to establish a cohesive understanding of the critical factors necessary for effective bioregionalisation beyond national jurisdiction, encompassing dialogue on key variables, pelagic and benthic approaches, knowledge gaps, how best to account for shifts induced by climate change, and comparison of global, hybrid, and regional approaches.

The final day brought the workshop focus back to opportunities for BBNJ ABMT implementation and network development/planning, drawing on the knowledge shared over the preceding two days. A ‘world café’ session saw groups of participants discuss i) the benefits and challenges of developing a global network ‘masterplan’, ii) the pros and cons of a global vs regional-scale approach, which knowledge gaps are hindering our ability to address connectivity in network design, and the role of stakeholders, and iii) whether network design might be within the remit of the BBNJ Scientific and Technical Body.

Final discussions looked at research needs to support the development of ecologically representative and well-connected protected area networks in the high seas, as well as science priorities to further develop bioregionalisation techniques and their application in ABNJ. A report of the workshop will be available in due course.

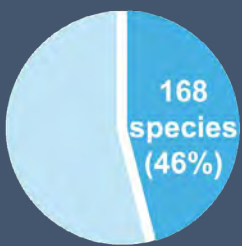
Huge thanks to the team at Duke University Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab (MGEL) for their organisational support and use of campus facilities – and to all the workshop participants for bringing their expertise, enthusiasm and energy to these highly productive discussions. Sincere thanks also to our sponsors whose funding support made this workshop possible: the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV) and Oceans5.

Previous page and below: Workshop participants at Duke University, March 2025.



The BirdLife Seabird Tracking Database: 20 years of collaboration for marine conservation

By Tammy Davies, BirdLife International



To celebrate 20 years of the Seabird Tracking Database we looked back at the remarkable achievements this compilation of data for marine conservation over the years.

Since its launch in 2004, the STDB has become one of the largest marine conservation collaborations and the largest collection of seabird tracking data in existence. It has transformed how researchers and policymakers address the growing threats to seabirds and the marine environment in general.

Ana Carneiro, lead author of the study, said: "The Seabird Tracking Database is a testament to the unique global collaborative efforts of seabird scientists that have made this unprecedented resource for marine conservation possible."

Seabirds are one of the most threatened groups of vertebrates in the world. They face multiple threats, including incidental mortality in fishing operations, with hundreds of thousands of birds killed each year as bycatch, and predation

by invasive alien species such as rats and cats. The STDB has been instrumental in addressing these threats by providing information on seabird distribution and connectivity, facilitating both local and global conservation actions.

"The STDB has not only deepened our scientific understanding of seabird ecology but has also driven tangible conservation outcomes, helping to protect threatened seabird populations worldwide," said Tammy Davies, Marine Science Coordinator and co-author of the study.

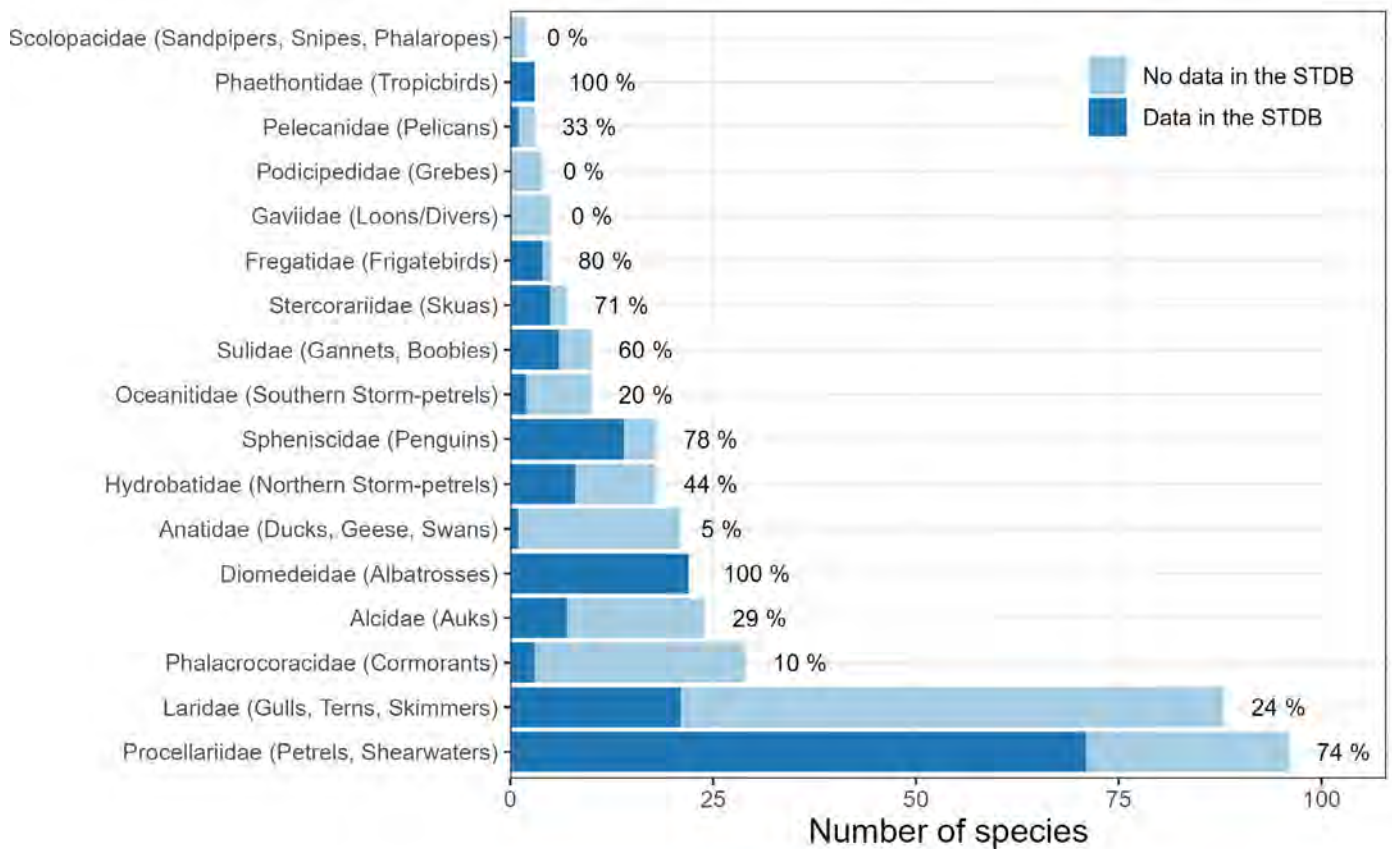
The integration and standardization of data into a unified database, coupled with the development of robust methodological frameworks to analyse the large datasets has enabled the analysis of multi-species and multi-colony datasets, shared by hundreds of researchers worldwide.

We reviewed the current status and significant conservation successes achieved through the STDB and published the results in [Biological Conservation](#).



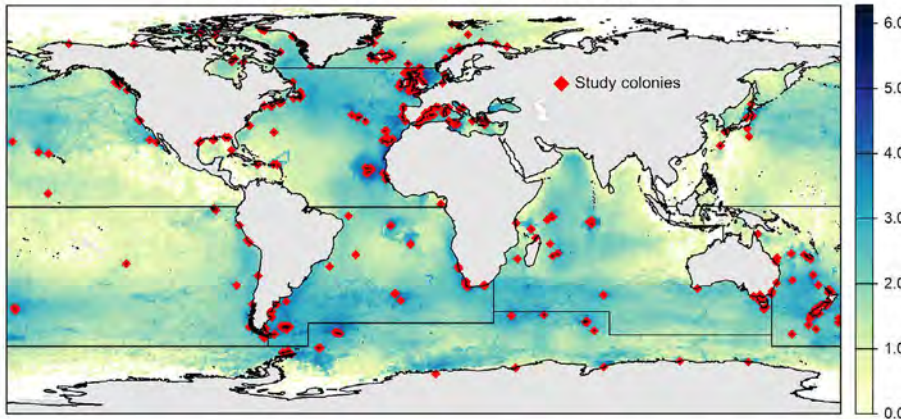
Key Findings

- Vast Body of Knowledge:** The largest centralised collection of movement data on seabirds. By 2024, the STDB held approximately 39 million location records, representing over 54,000 tracks from 168 seabird species across 450 breeding sites in 55 countries or jurisdictions. The number of GPS tracks has grown rapidly, with the numbers of GLS and PTT tracks rising more slowly.
- Key Gaps:** The family with the most missing species is Laridae (gulls, terns and Skimmers), and there are other important gaps for cormorants, auks, small petrels and ducks. Non-breeding adults and juveniles are less represented than breeding adults. Geographically, there are more gaps in the Pacific archipelagos, south of the Indian Ocean, and along species-rich coastlines.
- Identifying Important Areas:** Tracking data from the STDB and method developments have informed the designation of marine Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), with methods for analysing site identification from tracking data made accessible via the [Marine Megafauna Conservation Toolkit](#). Such approaches have led to the [first high-seas MPA identified solely using tracking data](#) and also provided compelling evidence for [migratory connectivity in the ocean](#), and have been crucial in informing the description of [Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas](#) (EBSAs).
- Fisheries and Bycatch Mitigation:** The STDB has played a pivotal role in demonstrating the overlap between seabird foraging areas and high-risk fishing areas. These insights have led to the implementation of bycatch mitigation measures, especially in international waters under the management of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs).
- Marine Spatial Planning Initiatives:** The data have also supported marine spatial planning processes, including in Malta, and French and UK Overseas Territories.
- Scientific Collaboration:** Data-sharing initiatives that were promoted via the data request tool or otherwise facilitated by the STDB have resulted in at least 92 scientific papers in the peer-reviewed literature.



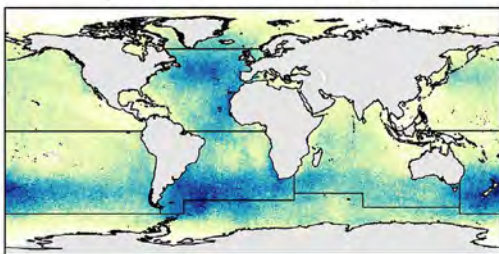
Total number of seabird species per family, and the number for which tracking data were available in the BirdLife Seabird Tracking Database (STDB) in March 2024. The percentage indicates the coverage of species per family with data in the STDB. Graphic from Carneiro et al. (2024).

a) Number of seabird tracking locations on a log₁₀ scale

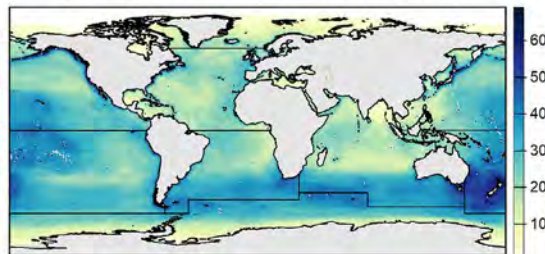


Spatial variation in tracking intensity across ocean basins in 1°x1° grid cell. (a) The number of seabird tracking locations from all species in the BirdLife Seabird Tracking Database (STDB). (b) The number of seabird species in the STDB with at least one location in each grid cell. (c) The number of all extant seabird species obtained from BirdLife range maps. (d) The difference between maps (c) and (b), (i.e., gaps in terms of the number of species covered). Note that gaps may occur because of genuine gaps in tracking effort or because existing tracking data have not been uploaded to the STDB. Maps from Carneiro et al. (2024).

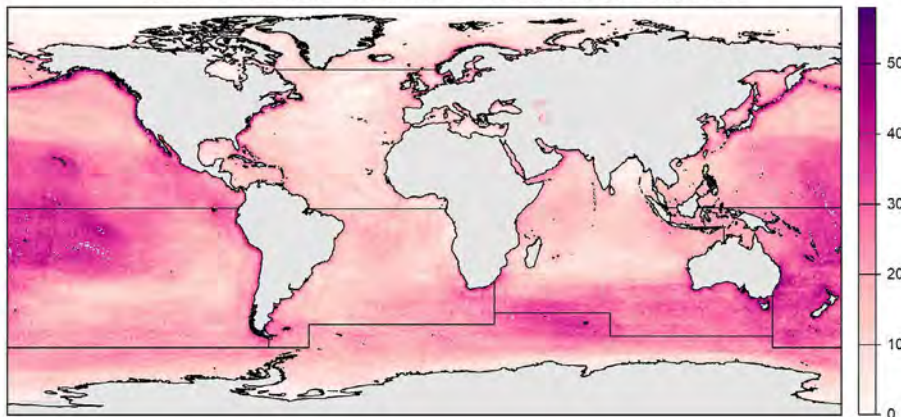
b) Number of tracked seabird species



c) Number of seabird species from range maps



d) Difference in number of species in tracking data and range maps



Looking Ahead

Despite these achievements, the study emphasises the importance of expanding the database to include underrepresented regions and species. With 56% of the species with a known trend experiencing population declines, and a growing number of new or emerging human pressures impacting seabirds in the marine environment, including offshore wind farms and the exploitation of new resources (i.e. deep-sea mining, mesopelagic fishing), the STDB will continue to be an essential tool for safeguarding seabirds where they need it most.

The STDB remains at the forefront of marine conservation, with plans to strengthen its collaboration with other databases and initiatives, ensuring that seabird data

continue to inform international environmental agreements, including the newly adopted UN Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement. We will continue to work to improve the user experience and maintain a secure and stable online portal.

We are extremely grateful to everyone who has engaged with the STDB – thank you! [Click here](#) to learn how to contribute.

Read the full paper: Carneiro et al. (2024) The BirdLife Seabird Tracking Database: 20 years of collaboration for marine conservation. *Biological Conservation* <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2024.110813>

Blue Corridors for Turtles

By the Blue Corridors for Turtles Team

Marine turtles are iconic ocean species, playing an important role in ocean health and in human cultures and tourism. Despite significant conservation efforts, many marine turtle populations remain at serious risk from unsustainable human activities and climate change. Their wide-ranging migrations expose them to many different national and international regulations, complicating protection efforts. Many conservation efforts are undertaken in isolation and have focused on local nesting beaches, often overlooking the oceanic habitats where turtles spend the majority of their lives. This has created critical knowledge gaps: data are often incomplete, regionally biased, skewed towards nesting females, and not publicly available. Conservation of turtle populations is further hindered by limited information on which genetically distinct populations exist and where, and uncertainties about which population is being impacted the most.

Blue Corridors for Turtles is a new global initiative focused on all seven species of marine turtles, aiming to bring together research institutions, NGOs, for-profit organisations, government bodies and local communities in a shared mission to conserve marine turtles. Specifically, Blue Corridors for Turtles leverages traceability technologies, including ShellBank (a DNA-based traceability toolkit that tracks and traces marine turtle populations globally) and satellite tracking, to map turtle migration and transboundary movements. By identifying critical habitats (as important marine turtle areas (IMTAs) using approved guidelines) and spatially assessing threats, this initiative aims to identify at-risk turtle populations and those that need greater protection.



We need to better understand how turtles are connected locally and across ocean basins in order to act at scale and with greater impact. This is particularly relevant to coastal communities that rely on marine turtles for food security, livelihoods and customary practices. Although the need for improved transboundary conservation is recognised, many communities, practitioners, and policymakers lack practical guidance on where to start. Fortunately, there is a growing movement and urgency to improve transboundary ecological connectivity for migratory species, like marine turtles.

For the first time, genetic data will be combined with tracking data in a global mapping framework. This project will also map coastal communities and other stakeholders working on turtle conservation. Extending the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group's regional management unit process, Blue Corridors for Turtles aims to advance conservation strategies and enforcement measures for targeted and effective interventions that support marine turtle recovery worldwide. The goal is to pinpoint populations most at risk, their spatial hotspots, and the required management interventions and policy solutions to support global recovery of marine turtles.

By 2027, this new initiative aims to define Blue Corridors for Turtles by tracking and tracing all seven marine turtle species

from nesting beaches to foraging grounds through genetic data and satellite tracking. Threat assessments will highlight populations at risk and in greatest need of protection from bycatch, over-exploitation, and climate impacts, and inform where important marine turtle areas are required. Governments can use these insights and data-driven science to deliver on their commitments under the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), the High Seas Treaty, and to target conservation efforts for the species, populations and habitats most vulnerable for long-term recovery.

The Blue Corridor for Turtles is being led by the World Wide Fund for Nature, in partnership with The State of the World's Sea Turtles program, the University of Queensland, and the Collecte Localisation Satellites group (CLS-Argos), and contributes to the mission of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group. For more information contact bluecorridorsforturtles@gmail.com

Information on the Blue Corridors for Turtles initiative is also available via the [WWF website](#).



**BLUE CORRIDORS
FOR TURTLES**

Pathway to action

A. Aggregate tracking data to establish a connectivity baseline and identify gaps

By June 2025, collate nesting, genetic & satellite transmitter information to identify key data gaps for future on-ground effort, and create a directory of active turtle conservation communities. A recent call for telemetry data has been issued to owners of CLS Argos data to underpin this effort.

B. Assess threats and identify populations most at risk

By June 2026, we will launch on-the-ground projects to address traceability gaps and conduct spatial assessments of genetic and ecological turtle connectivity and impacts from use, trade, fisheries & climate to identify at-risk and those requiring greatest protection.

C. Define Important Marine Turtle Areas and Superhighways for greater protection

By June 2027, together with the turtle community, we will define critical habitat (as important marine turtle areas) and propose superhighways for protection under frameworks such as 30x30, OECM, BBNJ and other protection mechanisms delivering on the GBF and other strategies. We will also re-connect blue corridor for turtle communities and partners to further enhance regional conservation efforts and action.



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43 new IMMAs spotlight whale habitats needing protection in the NW Atlantic and Caribbean

By Erich Hoyt, IUCN SSC/WCPA Marine Mammal Task Force

43 new Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) have been approved and placed on the map in the North West Atlantic Ocean and Wider Caribbean. The new IMMAs highlight habitats for threatened marine life: blue whales, North Atlantic right whales and Rice’s whales, sperm whales, as well as manatees in the south of the region and polar bears in the north.

IMMAs are defined as discrete portions of habitat, important to marine mammal species, that have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation. They are not legal designations but independent, peer-reviewed assessments based on criteria supported by the best data. The new IMMAs are now on the [IMMA e-Atlas](#) and are available for download as shapefiles with associated information.

Globally, there are now 323 IMMAs. To date, 79% of the world ocean has been examined for IMMAs, with IMMAs comprising nearly 18% of the surface area. IMMAs are divided into 52% within exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and 48% in international waters on the high seas. Since 2016, the eight-member IMMA Secretariat has engaged 314 scientists from more than 80 countries to join in this work.

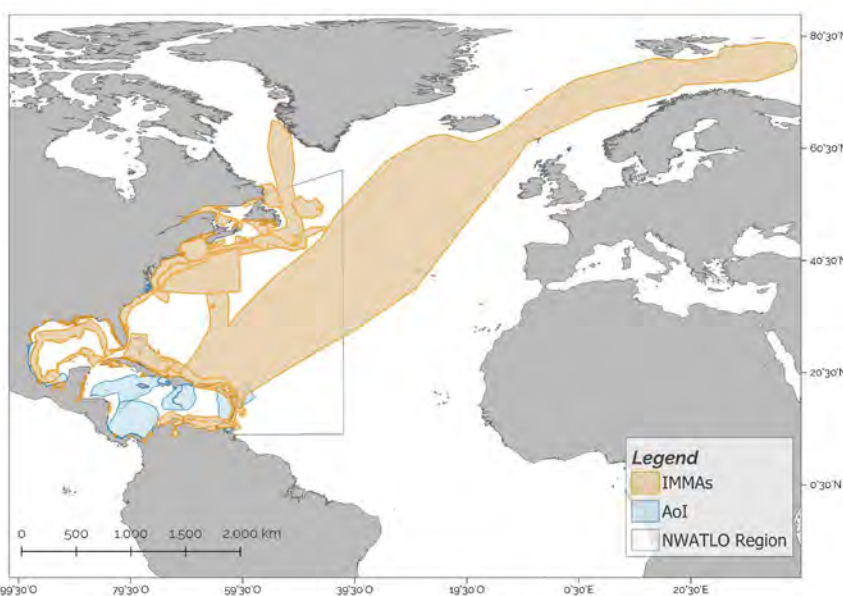
At a time when fishing and shipping have expanded along with proposed seismic exploring for hydrocarbons and rare minerals in the seabed, governments are having to make difficult decisions about which areas to protect and which to license for use, according to Erich Hoyt, co-chair of the IUCN

Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force and Whale and Dolphin Conservation research fellow: “IMMAs are proving to be a way to give whales, dolphins and other marine mammals a seat at the negotiating table.”

The Task Force is calling on governments “to take action to utilise the IMMA tool in marine spatial planning, for performing environmental impact assessments, and in the creation of marine protected areas,” says Task Force co-chair and Tethys Research Institute founder Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara. “We need to keep in mind the goal of protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030.”

The North West Atlantic Ocean and Wider Caribbean Region covers a quarter of the Atlantic Ocean from southern Labrador to Venezuela. In addition to the threatened whale species listed above, the region is also home to Risso’s, Fraser’s and common bottlenose dolphins, dwarf sperm whales and many species of deep-diving beaked whales. Several species reside entirely in this region, including the North Atlantic right whale. The recently identified Rice’s whale, native to the Gulf of Mexico, now has its first IMMA, as do the polar bears, harp and hooded seals in the Southern Labrador Pack Ice Whelping Area IMMA.

The [full report](#) from the NW Atlantic and Wider Caribbean IMMA workshop is available at the IMMA website, www.marinemammalhabitat.org



Left: Location of the 43 new IMMAs (orange) and 11 Areas of Interest (blue) identified by the IMMA workshop for the NW Atlantic Ocean and Wider Caribbean region.

Below: Participants at the IMMA workshop, held in Playa del Carmen, México, on 13-17 May 2024. Image courtesy Erich Hoyt.



Sargasso Sea Commission supports the proposal of a humpback whale migratory corridor IMMA

By Fae Sapsford, Sargasso Sea Commission

Each year, hundreds of humpback whales transit past Bermuda on their way from breeding grounds in the West Indies to feeding grounds in more northern latitudes.

The numbers are increasing every year, and Grove et al. 2023 report “up to 1434 whales visited Bermuda annually from 2011-2020.”

The whales feed all summer in areas off New England, eastern Canada and Greenland when those areas experience the most sunlight and biological productivity. They stock up on food reserves in order to migrate thousands of miles to warmer equatorial waters during the winter, where they can breed in areas where there are fewer predators to threaten humpback calves.

The whale season in Bermuda is in spring, with whale watching peaking in March and April. Of course, the animals pass by the island twice – once on their way to breeding grounds in December and January, when they are moving fast in order to join the fray, and a second time in March and April, when they are moving slower to feed and are more easily observed.

Nutrient-rich water from the deep is driven up the sides of the Bermuda platform, creating ideal conditions for the humpback whales to feed. This is important because by the time they reach Bermuda, males that have put on energy-intensive courtship displays and females that have just given birth are very hungry from fasting during the breeding season. The upwelling from the Bermuda platform means that the island serves as an incredibly important stopover site for humpbacks during their migration.

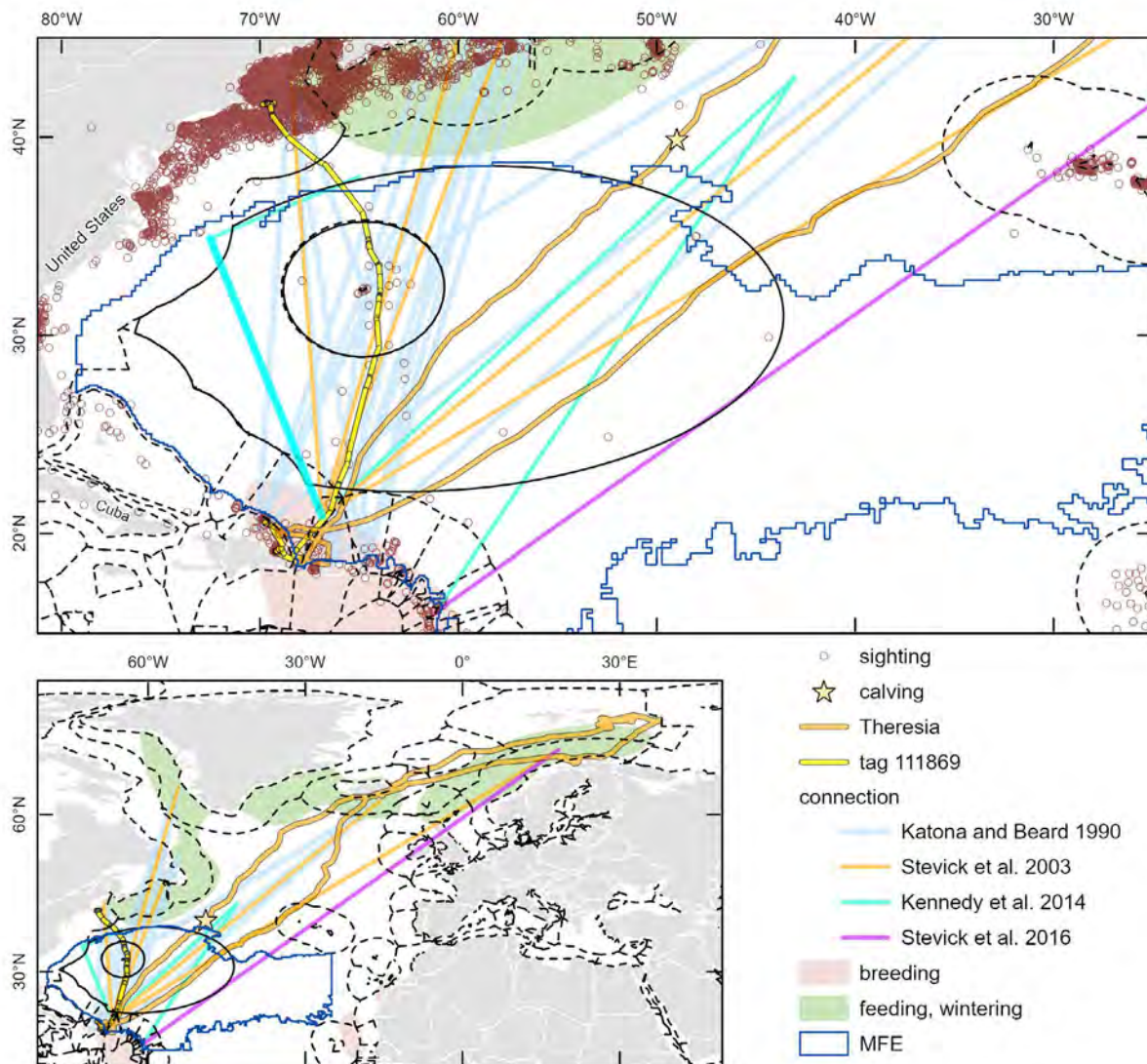
The global movements of humpbacks can be elucidated by capture-recapture – the practice of photographing humpback whale flukes in one area and matching those photographs to flukes of the same whale in another area – and satellite telemetry tagging.

As part of the North Atlantic Important Marine Mammal Area (IMMA) workshop in May 2024, geographer Bea Smith, then part of Duke Marine Geospatial Ecology Laboratory, synthesized multiple studies on the migratory routes of North Atlantic humpbacks to create a visual map on behalf of the Sargasso Sea Commission. This map was submitted to the workshop as one of 46 candidate IMMAs (cIMMAs).

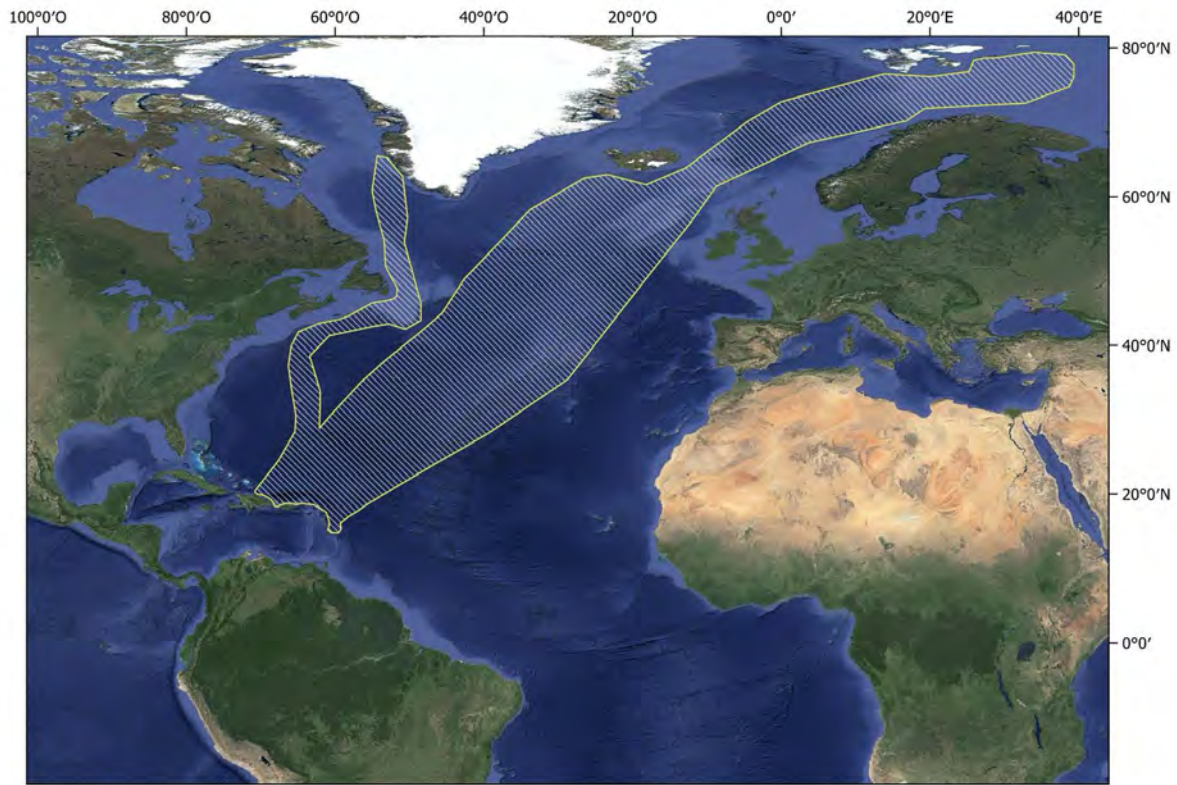
IMMAs are defined as discrete portions of habitat, important to marine mammal species, that have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation. They are designated by the Marine Mammal Protected Areas Taskforce, supported by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Like the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) process for the description of ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs), the IMMA process is science-led and carries no legal status or management obligations, though the designation can be used to justify arguments for conservation. Candidate IMMAs undergo a rigorous scientific peer review process, and those that stand up to scrutiny are added as spatial delineations to the IMMA e-Atlas, a hands-on tool for use by conservation scientists, policymakers, the wider scientific community and the general public to view

important areas for marine mammals at a glance. Each IMMA on the map also comes with an accompanying factsheet, explaining its importance to marine mammals and its justification for inclusion as an IMMA.

The initial draft of the North Atlantic Humpback Whale Migratory Corridor cIMMA – prepared by Bea Smith on behalf of the Sargasso Sea Commission (SSC) Secretariat, with support from Fae Sapsford, SSC marine research fellow – benefitted from the review of the workshop participants, in particular the expertise of partners to the Sargasso Sea project: Andrew Stevenson, a Bermuda whale researcher, and Dr Lea-Anne Henry, a reader in marine ecology at the University of Edinburgh. The proposed area was so large that it went beyond the boundaries of the workshop, with



Data sources contributing to cIMMA proposal: sighting (record in OBIS 2023b; putative calving site and tagging data from 2019 for Theresia); tagging data from 2019 for tag 111869; connections as described from the literature; breeding and feeding, wintering extents. A subset of humpback whale sightings (records) in OBIS were used to develop the tracking data. Data sources detailed in the cIMMA proposal. Image courtesy Duke MGEL.



The proposed North Atlantic Humpback Whale Migratory Corridor IMMA boundaries. Image courtesy Bea Smith.

the migratory route extending into the Barents Sea. This prompted a discussion of how IMMAs that span multiple regions should be handled, and it was ultimately decided that the entire migratory route should be viewed as one unit, rather than splitting it up between IMMA workshop regions.

The proposal was revised slightly after the peer review stage in order to exclude areas incorporated in a separate West Indies humpback whale breeding ground cIMMA, keeping the breeding grounds and migratory route as two distinct areas. The migratory cIMMA also overlaps with another proposed cIMMA – the Somers Isles and Adjacent Seamounts cIMMA proposed by Andrew Stevenson and Lea-Anne Henry based on their research in Bermuda. This area focuses on the upwelling phenomenon created by the Bermuda platform and its importance for several species of marine mammals including Cuvier’s beaked whales, bottlenose dolphins, sperm whales and humpback whales.

The North Atlantic Humpback Whale Migratory Corridor cIMMA has now been accepted in principle and is expected to be formally recognised as an IMMA in the early months of 2025 and subsequently uploaded to the eATLAS.

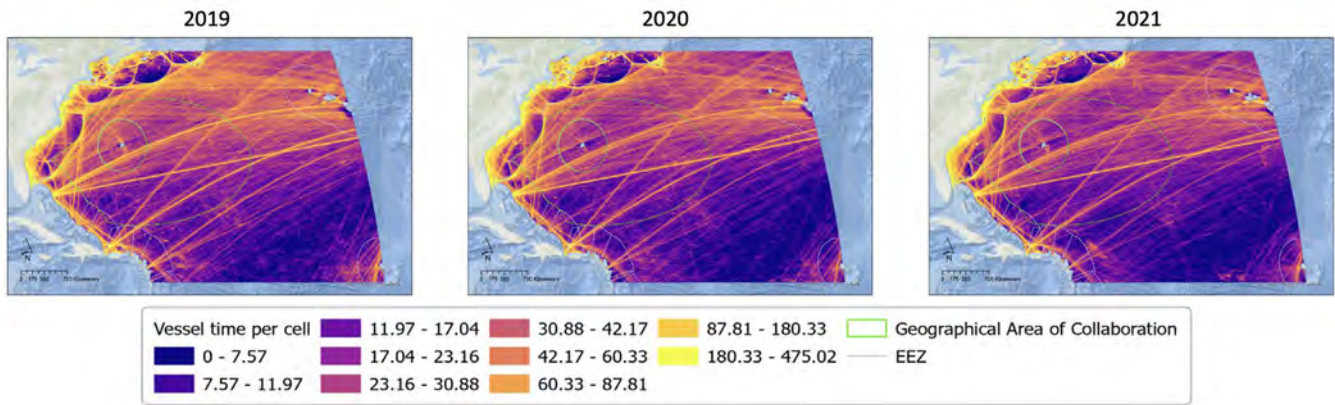
This designation carries important implications for the conservation of the Sargasso Sea. Research from Duke MGEL shows that the shipping routes in the Sargasso Sea intersect

with humpback whale migratory routes, with obvious risks of collisions with cetaceans and of noise pollution which impedes whale communication.

Duke’s research also shows that mean vessel speed has slightly increased over time. At 15 knots, the probability of lethal injury to cetaceans is ~80% (Vanderlaan & Taggart 2006), meaning that keeping ships below that speed threshold would have beneficial outcomes when ships come into contact with cetaceans at the surface.

As part of its stakeholder engagement strategy under its project financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Sargasso Sea Commission has held two stakeholder engagement workshops with members of the shipping industry in order to explore voluntary measures that could be implemented to strengthen the stewardship of the Sargasso Sea.

An IMMA designation also contributes to the conversation on the importance of this area for cetaceans, and possibly to enact conservation measures for their benefit on the Sargasso Sea.



Annual summary of vessel traffic in the Sargasso Sea (vessel time in hours) in 2019 (left), 2020 (center) and 2021 (right). Image courtesy Duke MGEL.

More about Sargasso Sea Commission projects

The GEF-funded Common Oceans Sargasso Sea project is committed to facilitating a collaborative, cross-sectoral and sustainable stewardship mechanism to establish a comprehensive conservation framework to protect the unique ecosystem of the Sargasso Sea. Led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), implemented by IOC UNESCO and supported by a comprehensive network of partners, it brings together the regional fisheries management organisations, national agencies and intergovernmental organisations and initiatives, the private sector, civil society and academia.

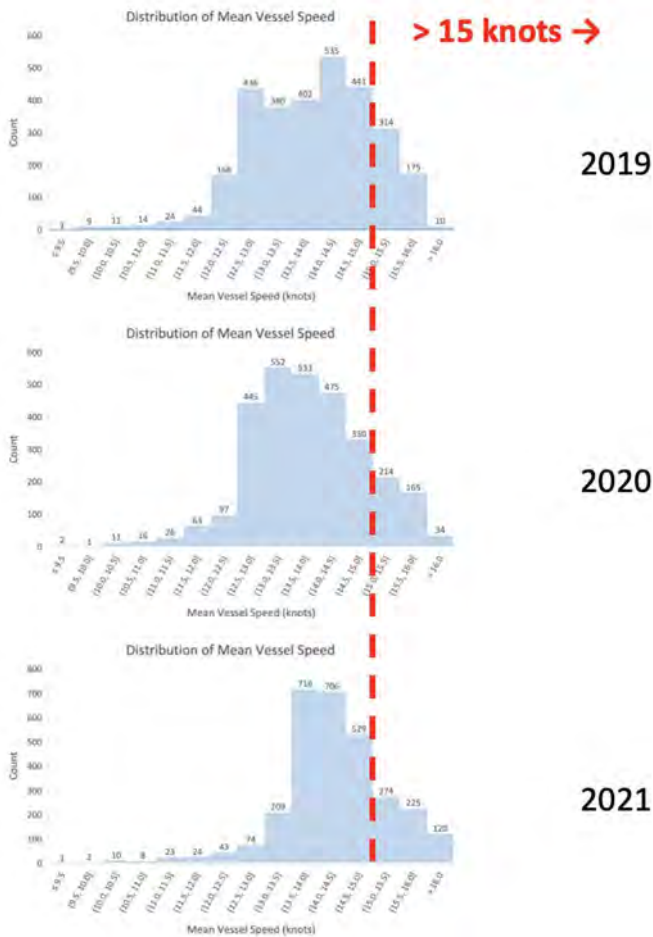
Funded by the French Facility for Global Environment, and supported by the University of Western Brittany, MarViva Foundation and the Sargasso Sea Commission, the SARGADOM project focuses on two remarkable high seas sites – the Sargasso Sea in the North Atlantic ('SARGA') and the Thermal Dome in the Eastern Tropical Pacific ('DOM'). The aim of the project is to contribute to the protection of biodiversity and ecosystem services, and to facilitate the development of hybrid ocean governance approaches for the two sites.

Learn more about the Sargasso Sea Commission on our website: sargassoseacommission.org

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Mean vessel speed based on AIS records for all vessels in the Sargasso Sea from 2019-2021. Image courtesy Duke MGEL.

Building a coordinated framework for research and monitoring in large-scale international marine protected areas: The Ross Sea region as a model system

By Cassandra Brooks, on behalf of the Ross Sea Research Coordination Network

To fulfill their conservation potential and provide safeguards for biodiversity, marine protected areas (MPAs) need coordinated research and monitoring for informed management through effective evaluation of ecosystem dynamics. However, coordination is challenging, often due to knowledge gaps caused by inadequate access to data and resources, compounded by insufficient communication between scientists and managers. These challenges are exacerbated in large-scale, international and remote

regions. Noting the ongoing work towards a global network of MPAs and the new potential for MPAs in areas beyond national jurisdiction (via the new High Seas Treaty), we are using the world's largest MPA in the Ross Sea, Antarctica as a model system to create an international interdisciplinary network supporting research and monitoring that could be implemented in other remote, large-scale international MPAs.



*Adélie penguins hunting in sea-ice crack in the Ross Sea, Antarctica.
Image courtesy John B. Weller*

Ross Sea Region Marine Protected Area Research Coordination Network

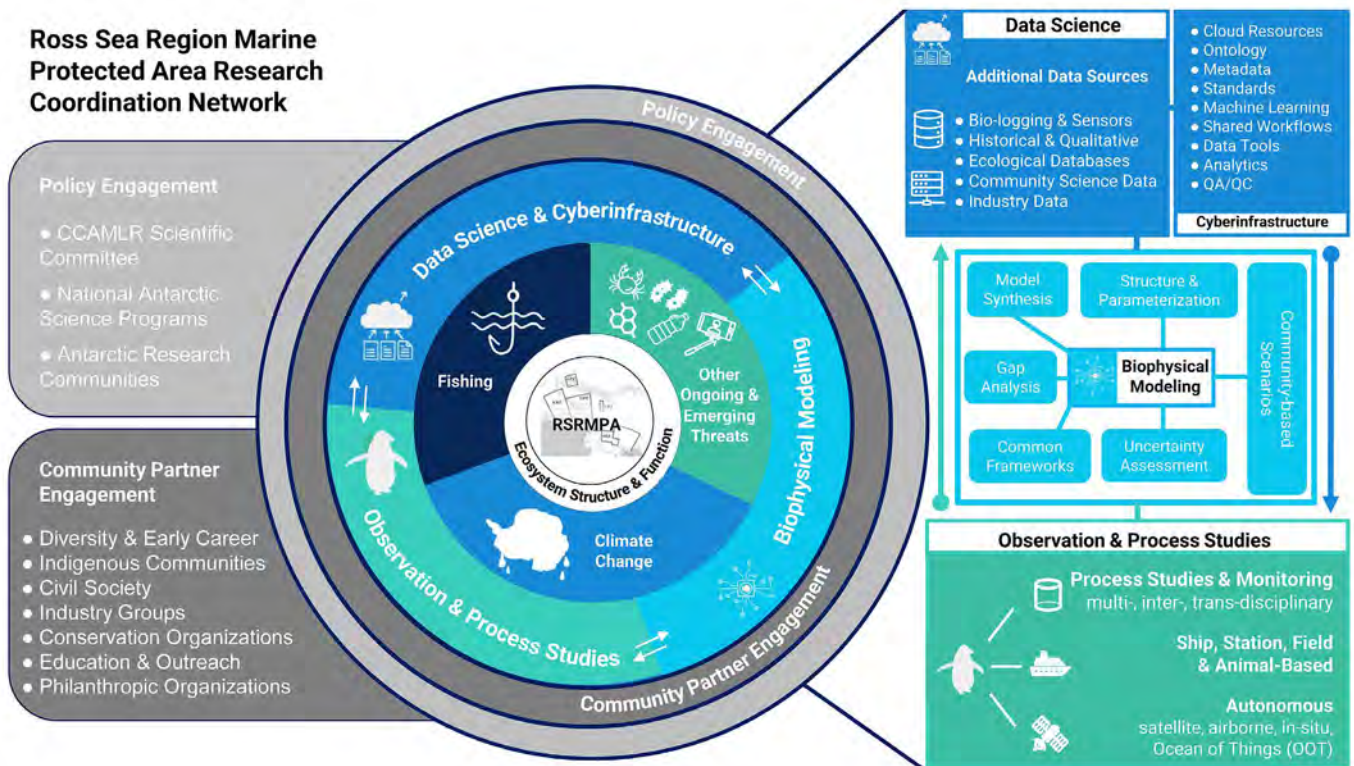


Figure 1. International Research Coordination Network for the Ross Sea region MPA (RSRMPA) to network three components: policy engagement; community partner engagement (left); and integrated science which comprises data science and cyberinfrastructure, biophysical modeling, and observations and process studies (right). The Research Coordination Network uses a policy (outer ring) and community partner informed coordination space (second outer ring), within which policy relevant science (third ring inward) is conducted.

To formalise this network, in January 2025 we received funding from the United States National Science Foundation to build a Research Coordination Network that will support research, monitoring, and science/policy integration in large-scale remote international MPAs using the Ross Sea region MPA as a model system. The Research Coordination Network intends to network three key components: (i) policy engagement, (ii) community partner engagement, and (iii) integrated science comprising three themes: data science and cyberinfrastructure; biophysical modeling, and observations that include monitoring and process studies (Fig. 1). Currently the Network comprises policymakers, scientists and representatives from a wide range of community partners including marine, Antarctic, and Ross Sea conservation and science organisations, industry groups and Māori communities. We seek to build on existing best practices (e.g., Blue Parks Awards, The MPA Guide), with a focus on large-scale, international and remote applications.

The Ross Sea region MPA (RSRMPA), which spans over 2 million km, is currently the largest in the world comprising 7.4% of all global marine protection (Fig. 2). Incredibly remote, it is located ~4,000 km south of New Zealand and is managed by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) which currently has 27 Members (26 Nations plus the European Union).

The Ross Sea is one of the most productive regions in the Southern Ocean, supporting a disproportionate abundance of flora and fauna for its size, and is considered to be among the world's least impacted large marine ecosystems. As such it is a global treasure but the ecosystem faces multiple threats, including climate change and fishing.

The MPA came into force in 2017 with 11 specific objectives focused on conserving ecosystem structure and function, including promoting research. Commercial fishing is prohibited in 80% of the RSRMPA, but research fishing is allowed in the other 20% (Figure 2). The MPA will be in effect through to 2052, at which point consensus agreement will be required to keep it in place. Every 10 years, CCAMLR is required to review the RSRMPA and evaluate whether its objectives are being achieved (or are still relevant) and whether changes to the MPA design are appropriate. In 2017, a research and monitoring plan for the RSRMPA, identifying key indicators for evaluating ecosystem change and MPA efficacy, was developed and endorsed by CCAMLR's Scientific Committee, which is composed of scientific representatives from each CCAMLR Member Nation. While the research and monitoring plan provides guidance, implementation and resources for research and monitoring are the responsibility of CCAMLR Nations, highlighting the need for international coordination.

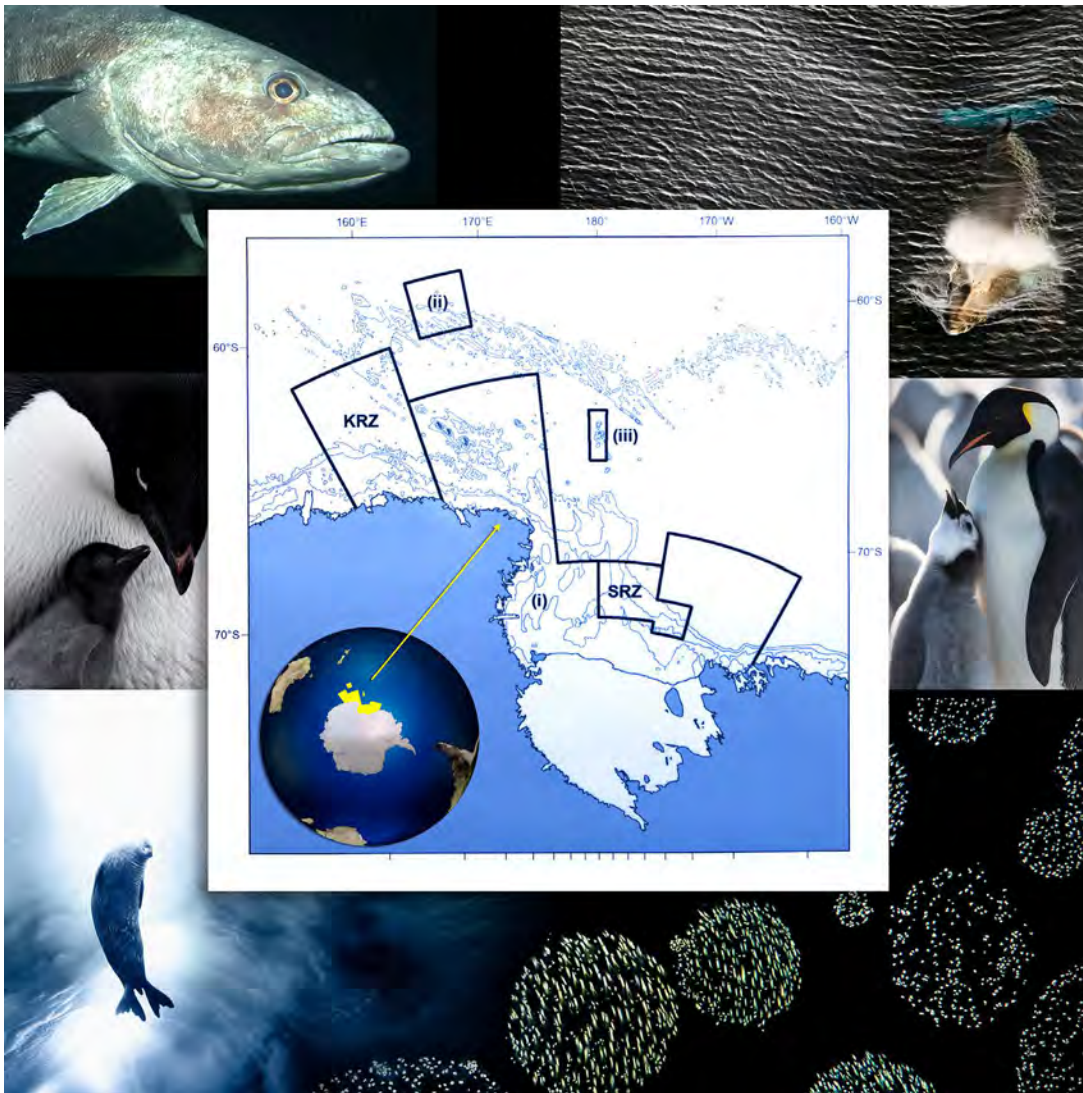


Figure 2. Ross Sea region MPA, Antarctica. It has three zones: a General Protection Zone (i, ii, iii) which is closed to commercial fishing; a Special Research Zone (SRZ) and a Krill Research Zone (KRZ) which both allow limited commercial fishing. The Ross Sea supports a vast array of marine life, including 25% of the world's Emperor penguins, 33% of Adélie penguins, and 45% of Weddell seals. Pictures clockwise from upper left: Antarctic toothfish; Minke whale; Emperor penguins; Phytoplankton; Weddell seal; Adélie penguins. (Photos copyright John B. Weller, except toothfish photo by Paul Cziko.)

In 2027, the Ross Sea region MPA will undergo its first 10-year review, presenting a critical opportunity to coordinate across the science, policy and other partner communities to ensure the 2027 review (and subsequent reviews) are well grounded in robust scientific data, analyses, and streamlined inputs into policy. The Research Coordination Network will support the 2027 review and subsequent reviews, potentially providing CCAMLR with the information to make informed decisions about MPA re-adoption in 2052. Lessons learned through implementation of the Research Coordination Network in the Ross Sea could offer guidance on how other large-scale international MPAs are monitored and assessed.

As noted, the Network comprises policy engagement, community partner engagement and integrated science. A major weakness in MPA research and monitoring is the disconnect between policymaking and science. We will work to streamline a process for translation of research into policy-relevant scientific advice and, conversely, incentivise scientific research based on policy-relevant questions.

We will do this through facilitating connections between CCAMLR and science communities. Creating pathways to better connect scientists inside and outside CCAMLR can ensure science is informed by policy priorities and that science from international Antarctic research communities has a clear path into CCAMLR.

Community partner engagement is key to the network. The Ross Sea region's status and management has profound implications for all communities on Earth due to Antarctica's crucial role in regulating global circulation, carbon sequestration, and sea-level rise. The Research Coordination Network will forge new collaborations that recognise this interconnectedness, elevate under-represented and early career voices and include diverse stakeholders such as Māori rūnanga (tribal councils), conservation groups and industries. Further, in-kind resources and sustainable financing will be pursued including enhanced coordination with ships of opportunity from the tourism and fishing industry.

Science integration is a core part of the network. Currently, Ross Sea scientists are dispersed geographically, institutionally and disciplinarily. The Network will provide a mechanism to bring these scientists together, working towards a common goal of better understanding the ecosystem structure and function of the Ross Sea region. The integrated science component of the Network comprises three widely encompassing science themes: cyberinfrastructure and data science, biophysical modeling, and observation and process studies. Data science and cyberinfrastructure provide critical structures for coordinated research. Cyberinfrastructure can reduce barriers between scientists, community partners and policymakers, while increasing usability and interpretability of data for cross-disciplinary research. Biophysical modeling is critical for evaluating ecosystem metrics and can be illustrative for understanding changes in ecosystem structure and function. Given the logistical difficulty and high costs of conducting in-situ research in large-scale, remote spaces, modelling can provide a cost-effective means of making projections across space (filling data gaps) and time (projecting into the future), incorporating existing observational data. Finally, observations along with monitoring and process studies are critical for addressing knowledge gaps and informing

cyberinfrastructure tools and biophysical modeling efforts. The Ross Sea region MPA Research and Monitoring Plan provides indicators species, and a detailed description of the observations needed to address research gaps. While national governments are working towards some of these priorities, resources dedicated to research and monitoring of the MPA are generally lacking and research is for the most part not internationally coordinated.

Through this Network, we seek to provide an example of how to bring together diverse interdisciplinary participants towards an effective, integrated science-policy collaboration. We envisage that this proposed Research Coordination Network can improve MPA implementation by generating policy-relevant science, which can in turn improve MPA effectiveness in the Ross Sea and beyond.

The Network is just getting started with our first meeting scheduled for 3-6 June 2025 in Boulder Colorado in hybrid form with online participation possible. We invite widespread engagement and collaboration from the Antarctic and marine conservation community. Please visit www.rosssearesearch.org to learn more or email cassandra.brooks@colorado.edu



*Sea stars and anchor ice in the Ross Sea, Antarctica
Image courtesy John B. Weller*

Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs):

A blueprint for conservation

By WILDTRUST – WILDOCEANS programme, South Africa



*Ragged tooth shark
Image courtesy Bryan Hart*

The ocean is home to magnificent diversity, including over 1,200 species of chondrichthyans (sharks, rays, and chimaeras), each playing a vital role in maintaining balance in marine ecosystems. Globally, more than one-third of chondrichthyan species are considered threatened with extinction, meaning that they are listed as either Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. Many of these species face critical threats associated with habitat destruction, climate change and pollution. However, the major threat to sharks, rays and chimaeras, is overfishing, both targeted and incidental catch (bycatch).

To address these challenges, the concept of Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs), led by the IUCN Shark Specialist Group, has emerged, providing a systematic approach to marine conservation and to contribute to the global effort to protect marine biodiversity.

Defining Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs)

An Important Shark and Ray Area (ISRA) refers to a specific three-dimensional portion of habitat critical for one or more species of shark, ray, or chimaera. These areas are delineated based on scientific criteria that highlight their importance for species' survival and well-being. Unlike Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), ISRAs are not legally designated zones with

regulatory frameworks. Instead, they serve as scientifically identified sites that can inform and prioritise conservation measures, including potential MPA designation.

Distinguishing ISRAs from MPAs

While both ISRAs and MPAs aim to conserve marine ecosystems, their approaches differ. MPAs enforce specific regulations to mitigate human activities' negative impacts on targeted species. In contrast, ISRAs are identified solely based on scientific criteria without any regulatory mandate. Many ISRAs overlap with existing MPAs, enhancing their conservation value. Conversely, ISRAs outside MPAs offer opportunities for future protection by highlighting areas requiring urgent conservation attention.

Criteria for identifying ISRAs

The identification of ISRAs is a meticulous process guided by scientifically developed criteria. These criteria encompass:

- Species vulnerability and recognising areas critical for threatened species.
- Key life cycle activities including identifying habitats essential for feeding, breeding, or resting.
- Pinpointing regions where species aggregate.
- Highlighting areas of high species richness and diversity.

By integrating ecological knowledge, backed by area- and species-specific scientific data, ISRAs ensure that conservation efforts focus on regions with the highest ecological significance for sharks, rays and chimaeras.

Purpose, vision and mission

The ISRA initiative aims to draw attention to the conservation needs of chondrichthyans, advocating for appropriate management measures to maintain these species' favourable conservation status. With a vision of enhanced conservation through a systematic place-based approach, the initiative seeks to globally identify and map ISRAs to provide actionable knowledge for decision-makers. The ultimate mission is to mobilise scientists and conservationists to investigate shark and ray ranges worldwide and to highlight areas requiring urgent conservation action.

The ISRA process

The ISRA identification process is facilitated by the IUCN Shark Specialist Group. It begins with dividing the world's oceans into regions. Within each region, stakeholders can propose a preliminary Area of Interest (pAoI) based on scientific and local ecological knowledge. These proposals are reviewed during expert workshops, where selected areas become candidate ISRAs (cISRAs). Finally, an Independent Review Panel evaluates and approves cISRAs, officially designating them as ISRAs.

ISRAs in the Western Indian Ocean

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is a biologically rich region covering about half of the Indian Ocean and accounting for over 20% of the global ocean area. The ISRA regional expert workshop for the WIO, held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2023, identified 125 ISRAs, one candidate ISRA, and 45 Areas of Interest. These ISRAs vary in size, from the small 0.03 km² Maroshi Thila in the Maldives to the vast 1,454,950 km² Western Agulhas Front in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

The workshop brought together marine scientists, conservationists, and policymakers from across the Western Indian Ocean region. Hosted by the IUCN Shark Specialist Group, the workshop served as a collaborative platform to review and refine proposed candidate ISRAs and other areas of interest. Delegates included representatives from regional NGOs, universities, and international conservation organisations, all contributing their expertise to ensure that the identified ISRAs met rigorous scientific standards.

WILDTRUST, through their WILDOCEANS programme, played a significant role in the designation of South African ISRAs. By providing logistical support, facilitating stakeholder

engagement, and contributing local ecological insights, WILDTRUST ensured the process was inclusive and thorough.

Spotlight on South African ISRAs

South Africa's marine ecosystems are vital for the conservation of many threatened species. Key ISRAs in the region include:

1. **Greater Aliwal Shoal** Located off KwaZulu-Natal, this diverse area supports reproductive, feeding, and resting activities for species like the Raggedtooth Shark and Shorthorned Pygmy Devil Ray. Overlapping with the Aliwal Shoal MPA, it plays a pivotal role in the annual Sardine Run, a phenomenon that attracts large predators and enriches marine biodiversity.
2. **Greater Protea Banks** A marine biodiversity hotspot influenced by the Agulhas Current, this area supports key ecological processes and hosts species such as the Scalloped Hammerhead Shark and Dusky Shark. Protea Banks is a vital aggregation site for these sharks, providing crucial feeding grounds, particularly during the Sardine Run, when prey availability peaks.
3. **iSimangaliso** Situated within a unique biogeographic transition zone, iSimangaliso features habitats ranging from coral reefs to estuaries. This ISRA supports diverse species, including the Reef Manta Ray and Spotted Eagle Ray, emphasising its importance for reproduction and feeding. Its ecological significance is heightened by its inclusion in South Africa's first UNESCO World Heritage Site.
4. **Natal Southcoast Corridor** Stretching 100 kilometres along KwaZulu-Natal's coastline, this corridor supports seasonal movements and aggregations of species like the Copper Shark and Blacktip Shark. It encompasses MPAs and Critical Biodiversity Areas, serving as a migratory route and foraging zone, which are vital for maintaining population connectivity and resilience.
5. **St Lucia Estuary** As part of Africa's largest estuarine system, this ISRA serves as a nursery for species like the Bull Shark. The reopening of the estuary mouth in 2021 reaffirmed its significance as a pupping ground, restoring essential ecological functions that had been disrupted by prior human interventions.
6. **uThukela** Located within the Natal Bight, this area is a biodiversity hub featuring reefs, gravel fields, and estuarine environments. It is critical for species like the Twineye Skate and Spinner Shark. Recent studies suggest that its productivity, driven by nutrient inflows from the uThukela River, sustains a complex food web that supports higher trophic levels, highlighting the need for targeted conservation.

- 7. Ponta do Ouro (Mozambique)** This transboundary area hosts high-latitude coral reefs and threatened species like the Scalloped Hammerhead. Seasonal aggregations at Pinnacle Reef, often linked to reproductive cycles, underline its ecological importance and the necessity for cross-border conservation strategies.
- 8. Thongaland Transboundary Corridor** Bridging South Africa and Mozambique, this ISRA features coral reefs and canyons that support migratory species like the Tiger Shark and Reef Manta Ray. The area's diverse topography creates critical habitats for resident and transient species, underscoring the importance of international collaboration for effective marine management.

ISRAs and the 30x30 target

As the world strives to protect 30% of its oceans by 2030, ISRAs provide a crucial tool for prioritising conservation actions. By identifying key habitats for sharks and rays, ISRAs guide decision-makers in establishing new MPAs or adapting existing ones to better align with these species' ecological

needs. They ensure that conservation efforts are targeted, effective, and scientifically grounded.

Conclusion

The ISRA initiative exemplifies the power of science-driven conservation. By identifying and mapping habitats critical to sharks, rays, and chimaeras, ISRAs provide a blueprint for protecting marine biodiversity. As we progress towards global conservation goals, these areas will play an indispensable role in safeguarding the health of our oceans and the species that call them home.

For more information:

<https://sharksunderattackcampaign.co.za/>
[@sharksunderattackcampaign](https://twitter.com/sharksunderattackcampaign)



Strengthening capacity for area-based conservation on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of Africa

By Marketa Zackova, CBD Secretariat

The Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI), a global capacity-building platform coordinated by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), brought together experts, policymakers and practitioners for a regional capacity-building workshop for the States of the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of Africa, held in Dakar on 10-13 February 2025 to focus specifically on area-based conservation in the context of Target 3 (often referred to as the '30x30' target) of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). Target 3 of the KMGBF calls for the effective conservation and management of 30% of the world's land, waters and seas by 2030, through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs). With only 8.34% of the ocean currently covered by marine protected areas (MPAs), accelerating effective and impactful action is now more urgent than ever.

The workshop was convened by the CBD Secretariat in collaboration with Senegal and the University of Brest, with financial support from the Governments of France (French Biodiversity Agency) and the Republic of Korea (Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries).

Through expert presentations, Q&A sessions and breakout group discussions, managers, government officers, global and regional organisations, and representatives of indigenous

peoples and local communities, women and youth discussed the status of MPAs and OECMs. They identified key needs and opportunities at the local, national and regional scales to scale up the coverage and effectiveness of MPAs and OECMs, with a focus on ensuring ecological connectivity, representivity and spatial planning, as well as strengthening stakeholder engagement, governance, compliance and enforcement.

The workshop also provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the newly adopted modalities for describing and modifying ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs), building on the significant amount of work in the region to refine and utilise EBSAs described through a previous workshop in 2013. The new BBNJ Agreement was also a key area of discussion, including opportunities to catalyse action on MPAs both within and beyond national jurisdiction.

With Senegal preparing to host the sixth International Marine Protected Areas Congress (IMPAC6) in 2027, as well as the urgent need to accelerate the implementation and achievement of Target 3 of the KMGBF, this workshop provided a timely opportunity to strengthen capacity as well as identify opportunities, challenges, and next steps for area-based conservation and cooperation for a healthy, resilient and productive ocean in the region and globally.





Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative


Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative



Providing the scientific basis for conserving
biological diversity in the global ocean


The Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative is an international partnership of organisations committed to advancing the scientific basis for conserving biological diversity in the marine environment. In particular, GOBI contributes expertise, knowledge and data to support the Convention on Biological Diversity's efforts to identify ecologically and biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs) by assisting a range of intergovernmental, regional and national organisations to use and develop data, tools and methodologies.

GOBI also undertakes research to generate new science that will enhance the value of EBSAs and their utility for promoting environmental protection and management for specific areas of the world's oceans. The intention is ultimately to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss through the application of ecosystem approaches to the management of human activities, and to support the establishment of networks of representative marine protected areas in national and international waters.

The GOBI partnership and activities are coordinated by a Secretariat team, provided by Seascope Consultants Ltd. GOBI is supported by funding from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV).

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