Marine Conservation Institute

SEA STATES 2015

MPAtlas

HOW WELL DOES YOUR STATE PROTECT YOUR COASTAL WATERS?

Palmyra Atoll in the Pacific Remote Islands National Monument, Kydd Pollock

SUMMARY

Oceans are essential to human survival and prosperity, yet our activities are pushing many critical marine species toward extinction. Marine biologists agree that the best way to maintain the oceans' diversity, abundance and resilience is to protect marine life in their ecosystems, especially in strong no-take marine reserves that are free from extractive activities such as fishing, mining, and oil and gas development. Protecting biodiversity in designated areas increases the abundance of fishes and bolsters the quantity of marine life exported to surrounding areas, securing food resources for millions of people. While many coastal states and territories have established scattered marine protected areas, these zones are often temporary and offer limited protection from bottom trawling and other detrimental activities, providing few benefits to marine life and people. SeaStates 2015 is a rigorous, quantitative account of no-take marine reserves in the waters of US coastal states and territories updated annually.

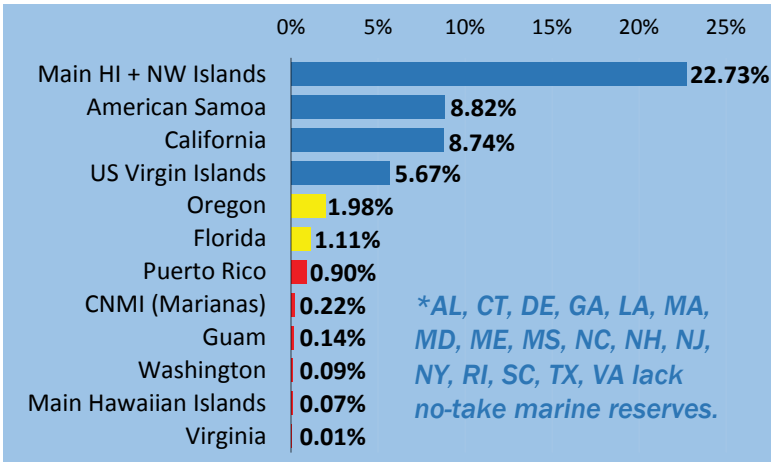
Few states provide strong protection for marine ecosystems. There is still an enormous need for ocean protection.

2015 Results

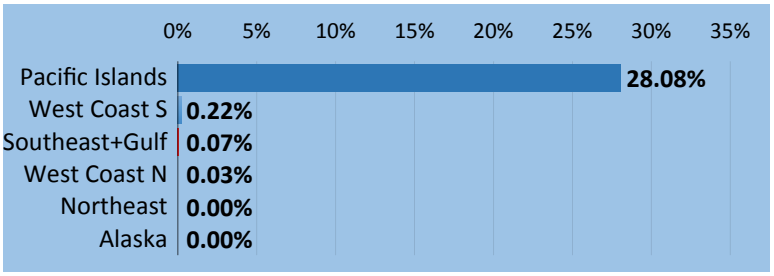
The best-protected states and territories are the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, American Samoa, California and the US Virgin Islands for the second year running. There was no increase in the amount of no-take marine reserves in state waters in the last year; the majority of states still lack marine reserves in their coastal waters. While Hawaii's state waters in the remote northwestern islands and atolls are fully protected within Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, coastal waters in the populated main islands contain only a few small reserves.

A historic step was taken in the fall of 2014 by President Obama when he expanded the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument to be the largest protected area on the planet, increasing the size from 83,000 to 491,000 mi^2. The US waters surrounding Wake Atoll, Johnston Atoll and Jarvis Island are now strongly protected as no-take reserves. In 2015, two National Marine Sanctuaries along the coast of California were significantly enlarged to protect this region from drilling as well as oil and gas exploration, but these sanctuaries are still open to most forms of fishing including bottom trawling, the most destructive method.

No-Take Reserve Area by State/Territory

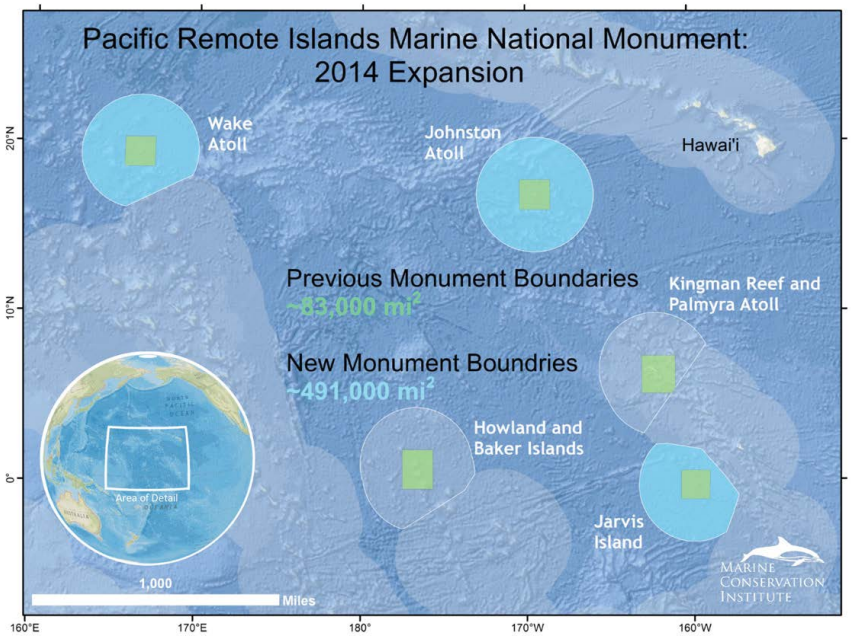


No-Take Reserve Area by Region - All US Waters



What Changed This Year?

The only change in no-take coverage in the US this year was the expansion of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. These small islands and atolls in the Central Pacific Ocean are not formally a state or territory and are entirely managed by the federal government.



Future Efforts

In the coming months, US no-take coverage may be expanded in Florida's Biscayne Bay National Park. The new changes, if implemented, would set aside approximately 6% of the park's waters for conservation to restore the coral reef ecosystem. Additionally, the planned implementation of a new no-take reserve in Oregon will expand that state's network of marine reserves and protected areas in the coming year.

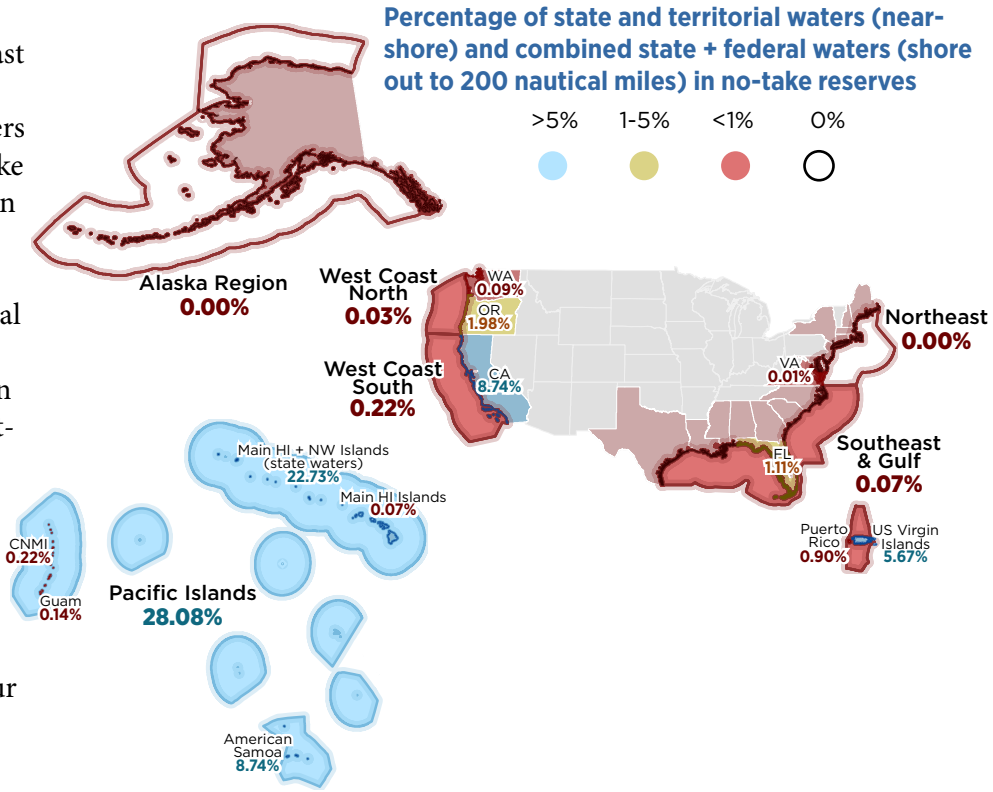
Risk and Resilience

On May 19th, 2015 an onshore underground pipeline ruptured off of California's coast, leaking thousands of gallons of crude oil into the Pacific Ocean. Sea life and important ocean habitat found in four marine protected areas located close to the oil leak were critically impacted and threatened. Catastrophes both natural and the result of human error and ignorance will inevitably happen outside of and within protected areas. However, marine reserves are more resilient to threats than unprotected areas and provide a life insurance policy for marine life well beyond their borders.

Many marine protected areas are more appropriately termed "fisheries management areas" as they lack strong conservation objectives. Fishing regulations do offer some protections in the form of restricted seasons, gear choices or prohibitions on certain species, but they do not offer the full suite of safeguards critical to ensuring resilience of ocean ecosystems.

To successfully recover and maintain healthy oceans, scientists recommend protecting at least 20% of each biogeographic region in no-take marine reserves. Currently, 13.47% of US waters are protected at this level. However, this no-take area is almost entirely remotely concentrated in the US Pacific Islands region.

Aichi Target 11 of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, of which the US is a signatory, calls for protection of ecologically representative and well connected systems for 10% of national coastal and marine areas. The US currently only protects one large biogeographic region with no-take protection greater than 1%. Future efforts to expand marine protected area coverage in US coastal waters should focus on building a representative network of areas across all of our unique marine ecosystems.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the NOAA MPA Center for providing information and also our generous supporters of MPAtlas: Waitt Foundation, Holland America Line, Winslow Foundation and Arntz Family Foundation.

Data for SeaStates provided by the US National Marine Protected Areas Center and MPAtlas.