



# Special places in our oceans

An introduction to ecologically or biologically  
significant marine areas (EBSAs)

## What are ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs)?

Ecologically or biologically significant areas of the ocean are those that meet one or more of the seven scientific criteria for EBSAs as adopted by the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity during its ninth meeting in 2008. EBSAs encompass many different types of marine ecosystems in different regions, and refer to areas that have been shown to hold the greatest richness of species and productivity of living organisms, possess rare or endemic species, or are home to unique communities of fauna and flora. Such areas often play a critical role in key ecological functions and processes.

Healthy and productive oceans are essential for the wellbeing of the planet's inhabitants: they are vital for the cycling of carbon, oxygen, water and nutrients. For humans, our seas provide an important source of food, support livelihoods and economic growth, and promote cultural wellbeing. Increasingly, the oceans are facing human pressures that threaten their natural balance, including habitat destruction, unsustainable fishing practices, pollution, climate change and ocean acidification. It is important that action is taken to conserve and sustainably use marine biodiversity, but we need to know where to focus our efforts. Recognition of EBSAs can inform decision-makers when prioritizing areas for management and identifying effective marine management measures.



## Scientific criteria for identifying EBSAs

| Criteria   | Definition   |
|--|--|
| Uniqueness or rarity   | Area contains either (i) unique, rare or endemic species, populations or communities; and/or (ii) unique rare or distinct habitats or ecosystems; and/ or (iii) unique or unusual geomorphological or oceanographic features           |
| Special importance of life history stages of species                       | Areas that are required for a population to survive and thrive   |
| Importance for threatened, endangered or declining species and/or habitats | Area containing habitat for the survival and recovery of endangered, threatened, declining species, or area with significant assemblages of such species   |
| Vulnerability, fragility, sensitivity or slow recovery                     | Areas that contain a relatively high proportion of sensitive habitats, biotopes or species that are functionally fragile (highly susceptible to degradation or depletion by human activity or by natural events) or with slow recovery |
| Biological productivity  | Area containing species, populations or communities with comparatively higher natural biological productivity  |
| Biological diversity   | Area contains comparatively higher diversity of ecosystems, habitats, communities, or species, or has higher genetic diversity   |
| Naturalness  | Area with a comparatively higher degree of naturalness as a result of the lack of or low level of human-induced disturbance or degradation   |

The scientific criteria for describing areas of ecological or biological significance have been developed to provide nations and intergovernmental organizations with a common framework and guidance for identifying such special areas of the ocean.

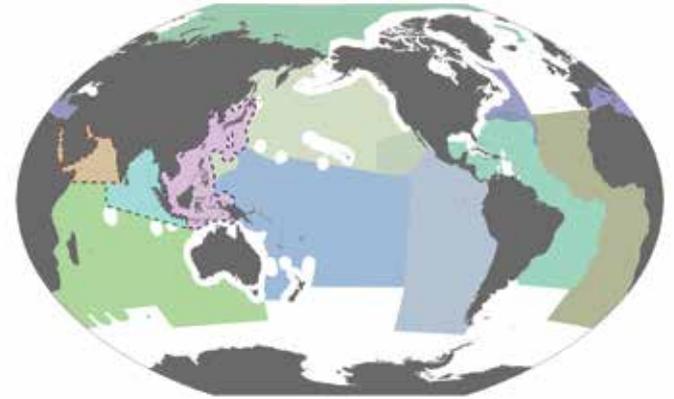
The EBSA criteria, described in the table on the left, were adopted in 2008 at the ninth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 9; CBD decision IX/20, Annex 1).



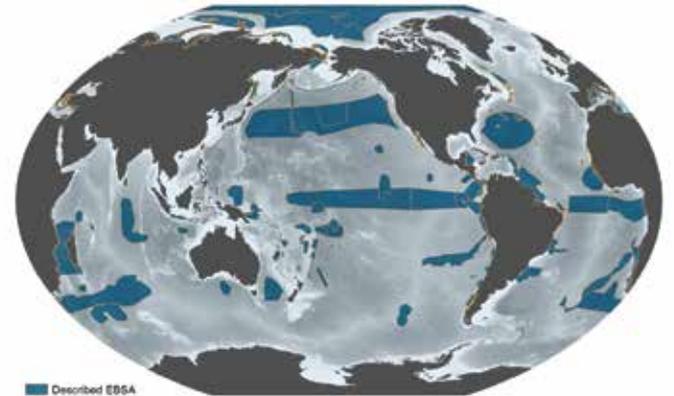
## What is the process for describing EBSAs?

EBSAs are described during dedicated regional workshops through an expert-driven, scientific and technical exercise using the CBD EBSA criteria as guidance. By the end of 2015, twelve of these regional workshops had been convened by the CBD Secretariat, collectively covering about 74% of the world's ocean. In total, these workshops were attended by experts from more than 150 countries, as well as by representatives of around 140 global and regional intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations (with some attendees joining multiple workshops). In some instances, training events were held prior to the workshops in order to develop capacity and to share ideas and lessons learned from other regions.

During these workshops, experts jointly source, gather and analyze relevant datasets. These include information that could support the application of the EBSA criteria, such as the abundance and distribution of species, locations and extent of ecosystem features and habitats, and the presence of oceanographic features. Candidate areas are assessed against each EBSA criterion and described in both textual and mapping format, based on scientific discussion among participants during the workshop. The workshop results are a series of EBSA descriptions ready for consideration by the Subsidiary Body of Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) and subsequently by the CBD COP. Once reviewed and considered by these CBD bodies, the results are submitted to the United Nations General Assembly and its relevant processes.



World Environmental Atlas (Lac, 2007) (www.earthwatch.org)



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The regional workshops are a scientific and technical exercise focusing solely on scientific information. They do not address, assess or prescribe any specific management measures or approaches. The use of ecologically or biologically significant area information and the selection of conservation and management measures is a matter for States and competent intergovernmental organizations, in accordance with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The descriptions of EBSAs prepared by these workshops can inform States and competent organizations in their efforts towards conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity, including prioritization of future research and monitoring activities to address knowledge gaps.



*Left, top map: The geographic boundaries of the 12 regional EBSA workshops convened by the CBD up to the end of 2015. Left, bottom map: Boundaries of the EBSAs described by the 9 regional workshops that were considered at COP12. Maps courtesy MGEL/Duke University.*

*Right, top: Participants at the Seas of East Asia workshop in China, and below, at the Southern Indian Ocean workshop in Mauritius.*

## EBSAs in a nutshell

### EBSAs are...

- areas with high ecological or biological value;
- focused solely on ecological and biological characteristics;
- described through CBD regional workshops or relevant national processes by applying the CBD EBSA criteria based on the best available scientific information and expert knowledge;
- varied, describing both large ocean areas, groups of features or individual features, and can be static or move with seasonal variations;
- found in all areas of the oceans, from nearshore and coastal to remote deep-sea habitats.



### EBSAs are not...

- specific recommendations for any types of management measures or restrictions of human activities (e.g., fisheries closures);
- marine protected areas (MPAs) or other area-based management measures;
- related to jurisdictional issues and, as such, are found both within and beyond areas of national jurisdiction.

## The role of traditional knowledge in describing EBSAs

Traditional knowledge can contribute important information to the description and identification of EBSAs. While there is no single definition of traditional knowledge, in the context of the CBD (Article 8(j)) the term is used to mean *“the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity”*. The CBD COP recognizes the importance of traditional knowledge for the EBSA description process and the need to effectively engage indigenous peoples and local communities in EBSA identification and description.

## What is the status of the EBSA process?

To date, 204 marine areas meeting the EBSA criteria have been described and considered by COP11 and COP 12.

- These EBSAs range in size from 5.5 km<sup>2</sup> to 11.1M km<sup>2</sup>;
- The boundaries of 109 EBSAs are located solely within one national jurisdiction;
- 28 areas include the jurisdiction of more than one country but do not extend into areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ);
- 35 EBSAs cross between national jurisdictions and ABNJ;
- 31 EBSAs are located solely within ABNJ.

EBSAs described by the three regional workshops held in 2015 are to be considered at CBD COP 13 (Cancun, Mexico, December 2016), which may further increase the total number of officially recognised EBSA descriptions.

An important scientific partnership that has provided strategic input to the CBD's EBSA process is the Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative (GOBI; [www.gobi.org](http://www.gobi.org)), which has provided important scientific inputs to all CBD regional workshops for the description of EBSAs. GOBI's international scientific partners work together to advance the scientific basis for conserving biological diversity in the deep seas and open ocean. The initiative is open to engagement with new collaborators to continue to fulfil its aims to assist countries and regional and global organisations to identify, use and develop datasets, tools and methodologies to describe EBSAs.



## What are the benefits of the EBSA work?

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Ecological benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EBSAs can enable policy makers to focus their management efforts to better protect and sustainably use oceans and their biodiversity</li> </ul>   |
| Economic benefits   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EBSAs can help secure the delivery of key ecosystem services and support the sustainable growth of ocean-based economic activities and wellbeing of local communities that depend on marine ecosystems.</li> <li>A transparent and evidence-based approach to describing EBSAs can give industry clarity for its planning of marine-area based business activities.</li> <li>Targeted and appropriate management interventions by competent authorities can ensure sustainability of various economic activities affecting the marine ecosystems that they depend upon</li> </ul>   |
| Social benefits     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EBSAs can help maintain the ecosystem services that the ocean delivers to people</li> <li>Appropriate management interventions in EBSAs can contribute to food security and sustainable livelihood</li> </ul>   |
| Process benefits    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EBSAs can support ecosystem-based and integrated management of oceans</li> <li>EBSAs can support evidence-based approaches to marine spatial planning processes and/or environmental impact assessments and strategic environmental assessments</li> <li>EBSAs can provide scientific and technically credible, evidence-based information for all sectors to improve understanding of the ecological and biological values of the oceans. They can inform the selection of appropriate responses to support these values and achieve goals for conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity, in particular the Aichi Biodiversity Targets and Sustainable Development Goals</li> <li>EBSAs can facilitate scientific collaboration and partnerships and provide information about areas that may require enhanced research and monitoring</li> <li>EBSA information can enable competent authorities to better fulfill their respective mandates</li> </ul> |

Benefits derived from the EBSA process can be ecological, economic and social. EBSAs also provide useful scientific information for policy makers. There are many useful examples of how EBSAs can support ecosystem-based integrated management. The Sargasso Sea EBSA and a subset of those described in the south-eastern Atlantic region are highlighted in the following pages.



## The Sargasso Sea Commission: advancing protection measures for an EBSA beyond national jurisdiction

The Sargasso Sea Commission presents an innovative approach to intergovernmental cooperation to conserve the Sargasso Sea, an EBSA in an area beyond national jurisdiction described at the Wider Caribbean and Western Mid-Atlantic regional EBSA workshop. The only sea without coasts, the Sargasso Sea sits within the north Atlantic subtropical gyre, bounded by currents such as the Gulf Stream to the west. It covers an area over 4 million km<sup>2</sup> with ocean depths in excess of 4,000 m. The Sargasso Sea has been called the “floating golden rainforest” due to the extensive floating mats of Sargassum seaweed which are home to many endemic species and are an essential habitat for nurturing many iconic marine species, such as billfish, tuna and turtles.

As a voluntary collaboration between seven governments formalized by the signing of the Hamilton Declaration on Collaboration for the Conservation of the Sargasso Sea, the Sargasso Sea Commission works to advance protection measures for the Sargasso Sea under existing international legal frameworks. Collaborating with international scientists and experts has further bolstered the international spirit of the initiative. The EBSA identification by CBD COP has provided important recognition of this significant area to be considered, as appropriate, by relevant international and regional organizations, such as Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO), in discussions of potential conservation and management measures.

The Sargasso Sea EBSA description was the first to be used as a basis for proposing fishery conservation measures, both through the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). In 2015 NAFO agreed to close the Corner Rise and New England Seamounts in the Sargasso Sea EBSA to bottom fishing, and in 2013 the ICCAT Ecosystem Subcommittee recommended that the Sargasso Sea be used as a case study for an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

[Source : Sargasso Sea Commission]



## Using EBSAs to inform marine spatial planning and networks of marine protected areas in the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem

The Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) stretches along the coast of Angola and Namibia and the western coast of South Africa. In recognition of their unique shared wind-driven upwelling system, which is both highly productive and extremely important for biodiversity, the three countries have created the Benguela Current Commission (BCC) and ratified the Benguela Current Convention to take cooperative action towards sustainable development.

In their efforts to achieve ecosystem-based and integrated ocean management, the countries are moving the region's EBSAs "from maps to action" by linking

scientific information to management actions. This involves the review of the 15 EBSAs that have so far been described for the BCLME in terms of quality and completeness with regard to criteria and mapping of the areas. The BCC Member States will also describe new areas meeting the EBSA criteria. Following the review and identification process, the status of selected EBSAs will be assessed in order to develop and eventually implement management measures necessary to sustain and conserve their key biodiversity features. The countries will use a systematic conservation planning approach in this process to inform the description of EBSAs and to determine the pressures or threats impacting on them. This will allow the condition of EBSAs to be assessed and the identification of priority areas which may require enhanced risk aversion in the management of human activities. These processes will inform the marine spatial planning (MSP) that is underway in each country and ensure transboundary alignment between the three countries regarding MSP and EBSA management. MSP regulations and implementation and other marine management measures such as marine protected areas (MPAs) will in turn secure the enactment of necessary management actions. In South Africa, for example, EBSAs provided a strengthened basis for the proposed design and extension of the national MPA network in its entire ocean territory, which is influenced by both the Benguela and the Agulhas Current: 14 of the country's 16 EBSAs overlap with proposed new MPAs.

[Source: Benguela Current Commission]



*This brochure provides background information on ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs), which have been described through a series of regional workshops convened by the CBD Secretariat. It also sheds light on how EBSA information can be used to advance research, conservation of marine and coastal biodiversity, and sustainable use of marine resources.*

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**For more information:**

[www.cbd.int/ebsa](http://www.cbd.int/ebsa)

[www.cbd.int/sp/targets](http://www.cbd.int/sp/targets)

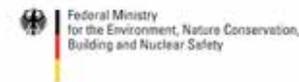
[www.gobi.org](http://www.gobi.org)

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