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FACT SHEET

30X30 FOR CALIFORNIA'S COASTS AND OCEANS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Kayakers exploring La Jolla Cove, near San Diego, California.

Q: WHAT IS 30X30?

A: Scientists are calling for the protection of at least 30 percent of the world's oceans and 30 percent of all lands and inland waters by 2030. This goal, known as 30-by-30 or 30x30, would safeguard our air and water quality, protect our food supply and health, prevent mass wildlife extinctions, and protect treasured natural spaces for all to enjoy for generations to come.[1]

In the oceans, such protections are provided by marine protected areas (MPAs)—the ocean's equivalent of a Grand Canyon or Yellowstone National Park. MPAs are created with varying levels of protection. "Highly and fully protected" MPAs are the most effective, providing safe havens for ocean life to recover and thrive without pressures from extractive activities like industrial fishing and oil and gas drilling.[2]

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Q: WHAT IS CALIFORNIA DOING ON 30X30?

A: California is leading the United States with a statewide commitment to protect 30 percent of its lands and waters by 2030. In October 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom issued a "30x30 and Working Lands" executive order to combat the climate and biodiversity crises.[3] The administration is now laying the groundwork for how a strong, effective, and inclusive 30x30 initiative could be implemented.

Protecting 30 percent of California's ocean will help restore the health of our marine ecosystems and make them more resilient to a changing climate.[4] It can also offer Californians a chance to create more equitable access to nature, bring communities together to conserve our shared natural heritage, and provide for Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Q: CALIFORNIA IS ALREADY A LEADER IN MARINE PROTECTIONS. WHAT MORE IS NEEDED?

A: California's 30x30 initiative can build on what's already working to better protect the full array of our state's valuable marine ecosystems.

California became a global leader in ocean protection when, in 1999, it adopted the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA)—the first ocean protection law of its kind in the United States. The MLPA created a network of underwater refuges—or MPAs—that stretches the length of the California coast, safeguarding 16 percent of California's state waters and sheltering valuable species and habitats.[5]

The 30x30 initiative provides an opportunity to evaluate and bolster these protections, given the scale of challenges facing California's coastal waters. Decades of extraction, pollution, and industrial use of the oceans have depleted marine ecosystems worldwide, including California's beloved coastal waters. Our ocean is busier than ever with shipping and fishing, and now new industries—such as offshore wind and aquaculture—are entering this crowded seascape.

Additionally, when the MLPA network was designed, few envisioned the early and profound influence that climate change would have on marine ecosystems. In fact, our ocean has been taking the brunt of climate change for decades, absorbing much of the heat caused by global warming.[6] Now, warmer and more acidic than ever before, ocean conditions are driving marine life to search for cooler waters and helping to fuel harmful algal blooms.[7] In fact, California is already feeling the effects of marine heat waves, like "The Blob" in 2014, a huge expanse of warm water that caused massive seabird die-offs, declines in bait fish, mortality of marine mammals, and harmful algae blooms that shut down California fisheries.[8]

Q: WHAT IS THE VALUE OF MPAS?

A: Highly and fully protected MPAs, which prohibit industrial activities such as oil drilling and certain types of fishing, are places where at-risk sea life can recover without further stress from harmful activities.[9] Creating spaces for life to rebound allows species to thrive and preserves important ecosystem services.

These areas also serve as an insurance policy in the face of climate change. As conditions in the ocean continue to change, MPAs safeguard diverse, healthy populations of plants and animals that can better adapt to changing ocean conditions.[10]

Since the creation of California's network of MPAs, many fished species have become more abundant and larger in size in protected areas.[11] In some cases, these restored populations can even "spill over" and benefit fishermen working outside the MPAs. For example, spiny lobster catch has increased by 225 percent near the Channel Islands MPAs since they were established.[12] This productivity has also increased recreational fishing, diving, and boating at the boundaries of MPAs in the Channel Islands.[13]

Finally, California's $26.5 billion ocean tourism economy—which makes significant contributions not only along the coast but inland and nationally—also benefits from the visitors and tourists who frequent local businesses.[14]

Q: HOW DO MPAS SUPPORT EQUITABLE ACCESS TO THE OCEAN?

A: The sea is a public commons that belongs to all people. Californians know and embrace this. More than half of all Californians visit the coast each year, and the vast majority of them enjoy the ocean through activities such as walking on the beach, observing tide pools, bird-watching, scuba diving, surfing, or kayaking.[15] But not all Californians have access to the ocean, particularly people with lower income and communities of color. By making the ocean healthier and more resilient to climate change, highly and fully protected MPAs preserve the opportunity for all communities to enjoy the ocean far into the future. The 30x30 pledge also includes a commitment to connecting more people to nature. More and safer public access and transit options can help us make sure that everyone—particularly undeserved communities that have lacked easy ways to get to the ocean—has the opportunity to enjoy the ocean's wonder and wildlife.

Q: THIRTY PERCENT SEEMS LIKE AN ARBITRARY NUMBER. IS THIS BASED IN SCIENCE?

A: There is strong agreement among scientists that society has not protected nearly enough natural habitat on land or in the oceans to halt the rapid loss of biodiversity.[16] Around a quarter of all known animal and plant species are threatened, and about one million are facing extinction in the next decade.[17]

Every 10 years, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity reviews and sets a timeline with interim protection targets to address the biodiversity crisis. In 2010 the Convention established a target to safeguard 17 percent of terrestrial and freshwater habitats and 10 percent of coastal and marine areas by 2020.[18] But marine and terrestrial scientists agree that this is not enough, especially in the face of the rapidly escalating climate crisis and increasing biodiversity loss. As the Convention finalizes its post 2020 targets, many scientists have rallied around the goal of protecting at least 30 percent of lands, inland waters, and ocean by 2030.[19]

Timelines and targets are a standard element of successful policy. They help promote timeliness and accountability. For example, the well accepted goals to limit warming to no more than 1.5 and 2.0 degrees Celsius have been critical yardsticks to guide analyses and motivate action. Of course, targets alone are not adequate. We must also pay attention to the quality and efficacy of the protections we establish.[20]

Q: WE HAVE FEDERAL AND STATE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT. DO WE NEED MARINE PROTECTED AREAS TOO?

A: Strong, science-based fisheries management is essential for ensuring the health and sustainability of the species we fish and harvest. Fisheries policy, however, is not designed to protect other, non-harvested types of marine life, from the plankton at the base of the food chain to the whales at the top.

California state fisheries managers focus on the approximately 130 fish species harvested in California, which represent less than 1 percent of the thousands of known species in California's coastal waters. MPAs can help manage and protect the other 99 percent.[21]

ENDNOTES

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