

Marine Protected Areas: one step forward, four steps back

John Humphreys explains why international policy on marine protected areas is failing.

In 2010 the international community, under the auspices of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), met in Japan to establish a series of 'Aichi Targets' for 2020. Recently the CBD has published the final report, *Global Biodiversity Outlook 5* (GBO5), documenting the successes and failures against each target. CBD reports that none of the Aichi Targets have been met, though a few have been 'partially achieved'. In 2021 a new set of targets is due to be established.

Here I reflect on the meaning of 'partial achievement' in terms of marine biodiversity conservation, by examining Target 11 on protected areas. My intention is to show how and why bad marine policy can emerge from good intentions.

Aichi Target 11

The text of GBO5 Aichi Target 11 includes five numbered marine 'elements'. 'These are:

'By 2020 at least [...] 10% of coastal and marine areas (2), especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services (3) are conserved through effectively and equitably managed (4), ecologically representative (5) and well-connected systems of protected areas... and integrated into the wider... seascape (6)'

Of these, element 2 is reported as achieved, whereas 3–6 have not. On this basis, 'partial achievement' is claimed.

A loose and proxy target

It is significant that the only claim of an achieved target element relates to percentage area coverage. Should we be reassured that at least 10 per cent of the marine environment now falls



Spiny seahorse *Hippocampus guttulatus* in Studland Bay MPA, southern England. © Emma Rance Noctiluca Marine.

within a marine protected area (MPA)? There are two reasons why not.

Firstly, the structure of the target enables claims of 'achievement' where none exists. The Aichi 11 elements are not sequential. Elements 3–6 qualify element 2. Since other elements have not been achieved, the achievement of element 2 is strictly meaningless. What has been 'achieved' are MPA designations: lines in the sea identifying the boundaries of ostensibly conserved areas, which may or may not be important, managed, representative or well-connected. Progress is asserted but it is disingenuous to confuse progress and achievement.

Secondly, in contrast, for example, to UN climate emissions targets, the Aichi target is a proxy target. While the former is based on strong scientific theory and measured in terms of actual emissions, the area target in itself has no necessary significance in terms of conservation outcomes.

These problems with Aichi Target 11 are not merely semantic; they facilitate a political game with many players complicit.

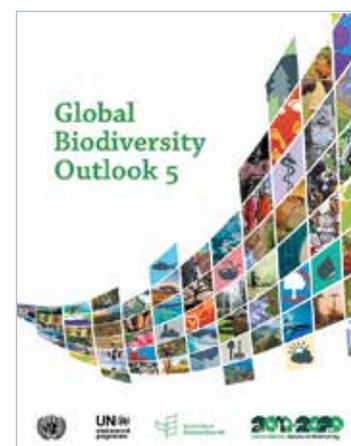
Gaming and grandstanding

However good the intentions behind Target 11, in both its original conception and by separating out the elements for assessment it has provided a gift to member states inclined to game the system and grandstand on the results. The gaming by governments of loosely expressed targets is well established in the literature. Gaming is characterized by minimizing qualitative standards in

order to achieve quantitative targets: a phenomenon perfectly demonstrated by the 'achievement' of the one quantitative element (10 per cent coverage), on the basis of failing on all qualitative elements.

Political benefits from gaming include the subsequent opportunities for government grandstanding. The UK Government, for example, has established a powerful public relations message around its 'Blue Belt' MPA programme. This gets amplified as technical documents are represented in summary reports and speeches. In March 2020 a UK Government environment Minister's speech repeatedly claimed 'global leader' status for the UK, which 'is leading the world in marine protection...'. For a rich western economy, progress could equally be described as failure in both leadership and achievement.

However, there is also a second problem with international MPA policy.



Front cover of the recently published CBD Report *Global Biodiversity Outlook 5* (GBO5).



Black-striped salema *Xenocys jessiae* in the Galapagos Marine Reserve.
© John Humphreys.

The increasing misapplication of MPAs

On the basis of achieving over 10 per cent MPA coverage, the UK government also imply that they are conserving the oceans, whereas at best they are conserving specified features and habitats within MPAs, and in practice much less. Nevertheless, MPAs have been promoted by the CBD, NGOs and governments to the extent that they are now seen by many as the only real solution: 'A blueprint to save marine biodiversity', compensating for failures of fisheries regulation. In addition to political factors, there are structural reasons for this.

The modern MPA movement has its roots in the National Park movement, which since 1960 has become structurally integrated (as the World Commission on Protected Areas) into a United Nations environmental nexus, of which the CBD forms a part. In policy terms this is distinct from the agencies and processes responsible for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, originally developed to regulate extraction, but always with environmental clauses. Both act in a policy space relatively protected from the preoccupations of the other. Consequently, legitimate different positions are not reconciled at the policy development stage, a deficit which contributes to international MPA policy failure.

In fact, the international community has now twice failed to achieve a 10 per cent target which was first established in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit. Nevertheless, along with many NGOs, the UK is lobbying to make the next target 30 per cent marine coverage on the back of two failures at 10 per cent.

The designation of MPAs and the creation of policy targets are highly political processes. As a consequence, MPAs have now become a politically distorted strategy for marine conservation. Good intentions have led to bad policy. While they are a proven solution as originally conceived, MPAs have become a game and their application is now outstripping their utility. Meanwhile the marine environment continues to degrade at a profound and accelerating rate.

Conclusion: what next?

Probably more of the same. But as Noam Chomsky has argued, ambitious, even idealistic optimism is probably the only plausible route to some sort of solution. Whatever replaces the Aichi targets should establish a strategic aim to explicitly conserve the whole ocean environment, not a percentage of it.

Persistent structural barriers between the marine conservation and fisheries management traditions of UN agencies, NGOs, governmental and even academic organizations should be mitigated or

more ambitiously abandoned, and the successes and failures of each should be acknowledged to inform a coherent suite of whole-sea (100 per cent) conservation targets. For example, conservationist scepticism of fundamentally protective whole-sea extraction management indices, such as Maximum Sustainable Yield, should be mitigated by acknowledgement of the failure of MPA policy. Conversely, the utility of MPAs as a proven strategy for protection of special, distinctive, typically coastal areas of manageable size should be part of a multifaceted solution. It should not be a competition between scientific or bureaucratic traditions; the whole could be more than the sum of the parts.

Also, the political reality is that resource constraints will always mean that global MPA policy can only become effective when stakeholder participation is more genuinely recognized at the policy development stage. Successful compromises are better than failed dogmas.

Most of all, targets should be simple but sophisticated, rather than compromised by facilitating gaming and grandstanding. It should not be possible that failure can be represented as even 'partial' success through proxy 'achievements'. To this end, targets should be assessed by direct biodiversity measures, related to whole system function. New policy must be informed by past failures, rather than just repeating them.

John Humphreys (jhc@jhc.co) FMBA, FRSB is a Professor of Marine Biology and Chair of the UK's Southern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority. The views expressed here do not represent those of any other party.

Further reading

GBO5 (2020). *Global Biodiversity Outlook 5*. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal.

Humphreys, J. & Clark, R.W.E. (2020). *Marine Protected Areas: Science Policy and Management*. Elsevier, Amsterdam.

RSPB (2020). *A Lost Decade for Nature*. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Sandy, Bedfordshire.