

Marine Life Protection Act Implementation

The Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA), established through legislation in 1999, represents one of the largest marine conservation and sustainability efforts in California's history. Unlike traditional fisheries management that typically focuses on single species or individual resource management issues, the MLPA focuses on entire marine ecosystems in a process known as ecosystem-based management. This emphasis on the importance of the state's marine ecosystem and species biodiversity has made California's efforts a model for other states and countries.

The MLPA directs the state to redesign its system of marine protected areas (MPAs) to function as a more cohesive and effective network. MPAs are discrete geographic marine or estuarine areas established to protect or conserve marine life and habitat. The redesign effort is guided by a Master Plan, which is being developed through a public-private partnership involving millions of state and private dollars, and thousands of hours of collaborative work by stakeholders, scientists and other experts, resource managers, game wardens and the public charged with appropriately identifying and classifying MPAs. MPA classifications include state marine life reserves, state marine parks and state marine conservation areas. Neither commercial nor recreational activities are permitted in marine reserves. Some recreational activity is permitted in marine parks but all commercial activity is prohibited. Marine conservation areas allow for specified commercial and recreational activities, yet these activities can be restricted to certain species and by the method in which the species are taken. Research, restoration and monitoring can be conducted in all three types of MPAs and law enforcement will play a key role in their success. By January 2011, three MPA regions will be adopted. In all, MPAs will cover about 20 percent of state waters in these regions. No-take marine reserves will cover about 10 percent of state waters.

The environmental community supports the efforts to designate these areas citing years of over-harvest, illegal take and other factors leading to a general decline in marine fish populations. The process for locating and creating the MPAs has been open and transparent with opportunities for input from virtually every stakeholder interest. There are several stakeholder groups, including commercial and recreational fisherman, that believe the protective status of the MPAs will reduce opportunities for fishing and, at least for commercial fisherman, also have socioeconomic impacts. Limited access to recreational and commercial enterprises could negatively impact fisheries-dependent businesses.

Throughout this process, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) has provided scientific data and expert consultation to the Fish and Game Commission (FGC) to help inform their decisions in adopting the plan of designated MPAs; enforcement in the newly established areas; and information to the public through the media, educational materials and public presentations. Once the FGC adopts the plan of MPAs, DFG, together with its partners, will continue to focus on monitoring, outreach activities, management and enforcement of the statewide network.