**The 2014 World Parks Congress (WPC) and marine protected areas**

**Congress overview**

Over 6000 participants from more than 170 countries took part in the IUCN World Parks Congress (WPC) in November 2014 in Sydney, Australia. These gatherings, taking place every 10 years, are aimed at pulling together current thinking on all aspects of protected areas and setting out a broad vision for the next decade. For MPAs, this WPC represented a real turning point, the result of hard work by the Marine Cross-cut Team, led by WCPA-Marine (the marine section of IUCN’s World Commission on Protected Areas), and comprising representatives of IUCN Marine staff, NOAA (the USA’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Parks Australia. In addition, the IUCN’s Marine and Polar Programme led the organization of the Ocean Pavilion, supported by the French MPA Agency, the Canadian Wildlife Federation, Google and other organisations. There were some 226 ocean and ocean-related sessions and numerous other marine-focused events; numerous marine related publications, exciting technologies and new tools and approaches were launched; and, perhaps even more significantly, MPAs were addressed in all the plenaries and in the more general thematic session: MPAs are now clearly considered part of the mainstream.

The size of the 2014 WPC meant that no one person could follow all the topics covered, and this summary is necessarily brief. For a broader overview see *MPA News* 16(2) Nov/Dec 2014 <http://depts.washington.edu/mpanews/MPA140.pdf>, and the recording of a WCPA-Marine webinar giving the key marine outcomes <http://openchannels.org/webinars/2015/keeping-promise-sydney-next-steps-marine-agenda-world-parks-congress>. The cost of such congresses always biases participation to the more developed countries but the global coverage of issues at this WPC was good. It was thus a real pity that there was such limited participation by UK organisations working on MPAs and thus very little exposure of the work that is underway in our waters. Ironically Cameron was attending the G20 in Brisbane at the same time – it would have been encouraging if one of his entourage could have made the short hop to Sydney!

**Targets for protected area coverage**

The Aichi and other targets were one inevitable focus of the WPC, and were much debated by the marine community. Since the last WPC in Durban, South Africa, 2003, global coverage of protected areas has doubled and the biggest increase has been in MPAs. MPAs now cover 3.4 % of the oceans and 8.4% of all marine areas within national jurisdiction (compared to 15.4% of the planet’s terrestrial and inland water areas). However, only 0.25% of marine areas beyond national jurisdiction are protected. Aichi Target 11 calls for 10% protection of the oceans by 2020. However, a non-binding recommendation from the previous 2003 WPC called for 30% protection of the oceans in no-take areas and, after much discussion, it was felt that this target should be carried through into the marine recommendations from Syndey. The marine community has yet to reach consensus on this – while many are calling for the more ambitious target, reflecting the urging by some NGOs for much greater protected area coverage in general (e.g. see [www.natureneedshalf.org](http://www.natureneedshalf.org)), others are concerned that such an approach will further antagonise those who depend on marine resources for their livelihoods.

There was also much discussion about the role and effectiveness of very large MPAs versus smaller ones, not to mention the confusion that can arise when statistics for all types of MPAs are amalgamated. For example, a report by the US-based Marine Conservation Institute ([www.marine-conservation.org/seastates/g20/2014](http://www.marine-conservation.org/seastates/g20/2014)) on the G20 countries (i.e. those with the 20 largest economies in the world) compared the percentage of their national waters set aside in no-take areas. The UK came out second on the list with 9.73% marine waters in no-take areas, after the US, due to the inclusion of Chagos in the statistics. Fortunately the report also makes it clear what happens if Chagos is removed, when the UK falls to the bottom of the list along with Argentina and Japan.

**Management effectiveness**

The progress made on *quantity* (i.e. coverage of protected areas) has meant that much greater attention is now being paid to *quality*. Another major theme of the WPC was thus effective management, recognizing that a sub-action of Aichi Target 11 is to assess 60% of all protected areas by 2015 and ensure that the results of the assessments are implemented. Stream 1 of the WPC (Achieving Conservation Goals) came out with a strong statement that “Protected area quality is more important than percentage targets: protected areas need to be managed effectively.” As is the case with much of Europe, less than 10% of the UK’s protected areas have been assessed.

Where management effectiveness and the biodiversity outcomes of protected areas have been assessed, the news was equally depressing. Only about 25% of the protected areas that have been assessed are effectively managed and it is likely that if only MPAs are considered, the percentage would be even smaller. There were disturbing presentations on the largely unrecognized “protected area downgrading, downsizing, and degazettement” (PADDD: [www.padddtracker.org](http://www.padddtracker.org)) that is underway as well as declines in funding and political support (e.g. Watson et al., 2014 www.nature.com/nature/journal/v515/n7525/abs/nature13947.html).

The various management effectiveness assessment approaches that are now being used were reviewed at the WPC, the feeling being that different methodologies may be needed in different regions and situations. However people are encouraged to use or modify existing methodologies where possible: useful guidance on this is available at [www.eci.ox.ac.uk/publications/downloads/coad11-protected-areas.pdf](http://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/publications/downloads/coad11-protected-areas.pdf).

The main UK focus was the launch of the report *Putting Nature on the Map* ([www.iucn-uk.org/portals/0/PNOTM\_2014\_full\_report.pdf](http://www.iucn-uk.org/portals/0/PNOTM_2014_full_report.pdf)). This identifies all the sites in the UK that meet the IUCN definition of a protected area and assigns them to one of the six IUCN protected area categories. The recommendations include one that is specifically marine: that the effectiveness of implementation of marine conservation areas should be reviewed in 2017, noting that “until the precise arrangements for activities to be permitted are agreed between the parties and fully implemented, especially for various types of fishing and other natural resource exploitation, the Assessment Panel cannot predict with certainty that these designations will continue to meet the test of being protected areas”.

The WPC also saw the launch of the IUCN Green List of Protected Areas as a mechanism to both celebrate sites that meet high standards of protected area outcomes and encourage improvement in management. This voluntary programme allows protected areas and their agencies to work towards a set of standards and criteria that, if achieved with successful demonstration of performance and outcomes, will give them 'Green List' status. The protected area needs to demonstrate evidence of real conservation results, as well as equity and social outcomes. The 24 protected areas awarded Green List status at the WPC included three MPAs: Gorgona Island Marine Park in Colombia, and Iroise National Park and Cerbere-Banyuls Marine Reserve in France.

**Congress outcomes and next steps**

Much of the material presented at the WPC will shortly become available, and a special issue of *Aquatic Conservation* is in the pipeline that will publish papers on the main MPA issues covered (the special issue of this journal with the 2013 IMPAC3 materials was launched at Sydney (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/aqc.v24.S2/issuetocnd)).

The main outcome of the WPC is the “Promise of Sydney”. This provides the principal conclusions of the Congress and a set of non-binding recommendations, in four parts:

1. [**A Vision:**](http://worldparkscongress.org/about/promise_of_sydney_vision.html)a broad statement about the changes needed in the coming decade to enhance implementation of conservation and development goals for parks, people and the planet.
2. [**Innovative Approaches:**](http://worldparkscongress.org/about/promise_of_sydney_innovative_approaches.html)a set of twelve documents drafted by each of the Streams and Cross-Cutting Themes including marine, with recommendations and interim targets.
3. Inspiring Protected Area [**Solutions**](http://worldparkscongress.org/about/promise_of_sydney_inspiring_solutions.html)
4. [**Promises:**](http://worldparkscongress.org/about/promise_of_sydney_commitments.html) pledges by countries, funders, and other organizations related to protected areas. Specific marine promises include:

* **Australia –** AU$6 million to support Coral Triangle marine protection and new initiatives to protect the Great Barrier Reef
* **Bangladesh** – creation of the country’s first MPA (Swatch of No Ground)
* **Brazil –** protection of 5% of its marine waters
* **French Polynesia –** creation of a new large-scale MPA initiative in the Austral Islands.
* **Gabon** – creation of a network of new MPAs equivalent to 23% of its marine waters (46,000 km2), which will bar commercial fishing.
* **Republic of Kiribati -**  agreement with the **United States of America** to jointly conserve nearly 490,000 sq n mi in the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument (USA) and the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (Kiribati).
* **Madagascar –** tripling of its MPAs
* **Russia** - increasing MPAs by 28% (i.e. a further 17 million ha).
* **South Africa** - tripling ocean protection in the next 10 years

There are also plans to hold what are being called “Little Sydney” meetings at regional level during 2015, to take forward the WPC recommendations and continue the debate more locally. A European “Little Sydney” will take place in Austria in May 2015, and discussions are starting to ensure that marine issues are adequately covered. In addition, the IUCN National Committee UK is holding a one-day follow up event to the WPC (*Protected Areas – Implications of the Global Agenda*) in Edinburgh on Feb 9th (www.iucn-org.uk). These events provide an opportunity for the UK to engage in these important global discussions.