

This statement has been drafted in an effort to bring together the European community of marine scientists in affirming the need for marine reserves and express our profound concern over the lack of progress in implementing marine reserve networks in European waters.

In 2003, the World Parks Congress, the largest global assembly of protected area specialists and conservation managers recommended that marine “protected area networks should be extensive and include strictly protected areas [i.e. marine reserves] that amount to at least 20-30% of each habitat.” This call is being echoed by other scientific, political and expert fora, including, in 2005, the United Nations Millennium Project, which called for 10% of the oceans to be covered by marine reserves in the short to medium term, with a long-term goal of 30%.

Decision VII/28 of the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity requires all signatory parties to complete such a network of well-managed marine sites by 2012, including representative marine and coastal areas where extractive uses are excluded, and other significant human pressures are removed or minimised.

In advance of the next Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP9), which will be hosted in Europe, Germany, it is time to take stock. All the more concerning is that neither Europe nor the rest of the world are on track to protect a network of marine reserves by 2012.

This lack of progress in establishing marine reserves is aggravating the already perilous state of many marine ecosystems. It further undermines initiatives aimed at a better scientific understanding of the composition and functioning of marine ecosystems, as it prevents comparative studies between exploited ecosystems and those that are left to recover or are as yet untouched. Marine Reserves are needed to serve as control areas in research efforts.

European Scientists' Consensus Statement on Marine Reserves

The continuing degradation of the seas around Europe, illustrated by the collapse of many fisheries, demands that urgent action is taken to stop this decline, restore marine ecosystems and manage them in an holistic manner.

We, the undersigned scientists, believe that Fully Protected Marine Reserves are essential for conservation, are necessary for the implementation of effective management of the sea, and have important benefits to scientific understanding of this environment.

Marine Reserves are sea areas where extractive uses are excluded, and other significant human pressures are removed or minimised that so that their associated ecosystems can recover towards a more natural state. Non-consumptive uses such as recreation are permitted.

Where marine reserves have been designated, they have been shown to result in long-standing and often rapid increases in the abundance, diversity and productivity of marine life, especially of species that were previously exploited. Marine reserves may benefit fisheries by the “spillover” of animals from inside the reserves and from the export of eggs and larvae to adjacent marine areas. Marine reserves also enable the development of more natural, extended population age structures that promote resilience to overfishing and are important to maintaining the integrity of marine ecosystems in the face of climate change.

In order to assure sufficient protection across the whole range of marine ecosystems it is necessary to establish a representative, replicated, networked and sustainable system of Fully Protected Marine Reserves. To be effective networks must, therefore, span large geographic distances and be of sufficient scale to protect against catastrophes and ensure the long-term health and stability of marine ecosystems.

Marine Reserves are essential to scientific understanding of marine ecosystems, and hence, to their management. They provide control areas for all direct human disturbances and more natural baselines for measurement of impacts. This enables scientists to obtain data that are less confounded by human activities (e.g. separating natural variation from fishing effects) and acquire a greater understanding of the intrinsic processes of subject ecosystems.

In summary – establishing networks of marine reserves will be a major step towards implementing the ecosystem approach to management of the sea. Such networks will yield long-term conservation benefits and provide support for other management methods to improve fisheries. They are an essential tool in the package of measures needed to arrest the degradation of European seas and bring about their restoration.

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