



THE ISSUE

Hong Kong's special geographic location and hydrographic conditions contribute to the region's diverse and productive coastal habitats. To date, close to 6,000 marine species have been recorded in Hong Kong, which makes the city's biodiversity comparatively rich compared to many other regions of the world.

However, this currently face numerous threats from development, unregulated fishing practices, escalating marine traffic, and marine litter. Other threats loom: a total of 2,000 hectares of local waters are planned for reclamation and development in the decades ahead. Not only is the marine biodiversity in local waters at stake, but some previously common commercially important fish species are close to extirpation.

Currently only 5% of Hong Kong waters are designated or planned as marine protected areas (MPA) by 2023, which is grossly inadequate to conserve Hong Kong's precious marine resources, especially after decades of intense coastal development.

Less than 0.1% are true no-take zones. The rest of Hong Kong's coastal waters receive little or no protection. This is in stark contrast to the protected land network where 40% of the land is designated as country parks in Hong Kong.

Properly managed MPAs can play a critical role in both protecting biodiversity and generating many social and economic benefits within and outside their boundaries.

A 20-year overview of Hong Kong's marine parks system found numerous shortcomings:

- No clear target or date for future MPA areas;
- No transparent long-term MPA health check data;
- Minimal stakeholder involvement;
- No clear management plan for the existing MPAs;
- No proactive, science-based MPA selection process; and,
- Fishing with permits is still allowed in the vast majority of MPAs.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

In 2017, working with a panel of more than 30 marine experts, WWF identified 31 ecological hotspots across Hong Kong waters, applying a set of six globally recognized scientific criteria, namely: uniqueness; special importance for life-history stages of species; importance for threatened, endangered or declining species and/or habitats; vulnerability, fragility, sensitivity, or slow recovery; biological diversity; and naturalness.

In 2018, seven of Hong Kong's most sensitive marine areas were identified by WWF, working in conjunction with local academics, fisherman and experts, for the establishment of an MPA network in the territory. The seven marine sites of immediate conservation priority could form the first 10% of an MPA network to secure the future of vulnerable marine hotspots.

The seven sites are West Lantau, South Lamma, Shui Hau, Sharp Island and Shelter Island (in Port Shelter), Ninepin Group, Tolo Channel and Harbour, and Pak Nai. Specific conservation measures for each site were also suggested, including setting up different management zonings, banning non-selective fishing methods and the use of fishing gears which could harm or kill local cetaceans, restricting vessel speeds, regulating human activities with statutory code of conducts, and adopting a co-management approach.

The measures were developed to advise policy makers and to suggest what kind of protection measures suit each site best. By utilizing the baseline knowledge from both scientists and local communities, we hope to advance the science and practice of designing MPA networks.

The government has committed to impose additional conservation management in some priority areas identified through a science-based evaluation by WWF and partners. These areas include the southwest and southern areas of Lantau Island, and potentially Tolo Harbour and around Port Shelter. Many other ecologically-sensitive areas suffer from a lack of adequate policy management, while coastal development, habitat destruction, and degradation are ongoing threats.

OUR ASK

WWF-Hong Kong continues to stress the importance of the government's designating and expand MPAs, in particular West and South Lantau waters, with strict smaller no-take zones embedded within the MPA as they have enormous biodiversity and fisheries benefits when properly configured and enforced. MPAs are essential for restoring the health and resilience of coastal waters. We look forward to true no-take zone covering core areas in Marine Parks, particularly Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park in the near future. This action should take place in concert with extensive community engagement efforts.

MPA networks need to be developed and managed within a broader program of marine spatial planning and watershed management. A robust MPA network helps fulfil Hong Kong's obligation under the Convention of Biological Diversity and its own actions planned for dolphins and other marine species under the government's Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. WWF-Hong Kong considers active measures will be needed by the government to:

- Allocate budget to conduct feasibility studies for the establishment of MPAs more broadly in 30% of waters in Hong Kong, and to identify potential fish spawning and nursery areas with MPAs covering these significant grounds. A network of science based strict no-take reserves, fisheries management zones, community based fisheries reserves, and other MPA designations should be incorporated;
- Designate an expanded network of strict no-take zones embedded within the MPA system as they have enormous biodiversity and fisheries benefits when properly configured and enforced;
- Put in place and open, transparent and long-term monitoring program for the marine environment within MPAs; and,
- Develop holistic MPA conservation plans and management objectives that adapt and respond to ensure the health of the MPA improves, e.g. pilot a system that accurately monitors fisheries resources and catches and carry out adaptive management measures when the fisheries stocks decrease.