

The status of
Marine Protected Areas
in the Canary Islands

A Regional
Perspective on the
Central-Eastern
Atlantic to Promote
Connected and
Effective Marine
Conservation



Executive summary

The MPAs Canary Islands project's main objective is to strengthen existing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and promote the creation of new ones in the Canary archipelago, with the aim of boosting their effective management and maximizing the ecological, social, and economic benefits they generate. The initiative is based on the active participation of key actors and the use of the best scientific evidence as a central tool for planning and decision-making.

This document offers an overview of the current state of MPAs in the Canary Islands, evaluating their geographical extent, level of protection, degree of implementation of management plans, and main shortcomings. At the same time, it seeks to provide an updated overview of opportunities to strengthen and expand the network of MPAs, generating a solid foundation for future conservation and governance strategies. In this context, the document aims to contribute to progress towards the global 30x30 target¹ by promoting a more coherent, connected, and representative system of MPAs in the Eastern Central Atlantic, encompassing the archipelagos of the Azores, Madeira, the Canary Islands, and Cape Verde, as well as the coasts of Morocco and Mauritania. It proposes strengthening existing MPAs and identifying both current shortcomings and opportunities for their improvement and expansion, moving towards a sustainable management model based on the active participation of local communities and institutional stakeholders.

The Canary archipelago harbors exceptional marine biodiversity within the Eastern Central Atlantic and is one of the main marine biodiversity hotspots in the region. Its biogeographical position and volcanic origin, along with the influence of the Canary Current and Saharan upwelling, allow for the development of a high variety of coastal and oceanic habitats, explaining this high species richness. However, the conservation status of habitats and species is heterogeneous and faces increasing pressures from coastal urbanization, pollution, overfishing, the introduction of exotic species, and intensive tourism. All of this underscores the need for adaptive and integrated management, based on the best available scientific evidence, to ensure the resilience of this natural heritage to climate change and the pressures of human activities.

Within the Canary Islands Marine Demarcation (DM CAN), there are currently 24 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under state jurisdiction, 11 Special Protection Areas for Birds (SPAs) under state jurisdiction, and 4 Sites of Community Importance (SCIs). These areas form part of the Natura 2000 Network (RN2000), which constitutes the fundamental pillar of marine conservation in the Canary Islands, protecting strictly marine nat-

¹ The global 30x30 target refers to the international commitment to protect and conserve 30% of the planet's terrestrial and marine areas by the year 2030, adopted in 2022 as part of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Authors:
Eva K.M.Meyers,
Leibniz Institute for the
Analysis of Biodiversity Change
MPAs Canary Islands

Héctor Toledo Padilla
Angel Shark Project: Canary Islands

Caroline Bousquet
Angel Shark Project: Canary Islands

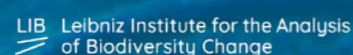
Reviewers:
Ricardo Haroun, Universidad Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
Yaiza Fernandez-Palacios, Universidad Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
Ayoze Castro-Alonso, Universidad Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
Octavio Llinás, MPAs Canary Islands

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ural habitat types listed in Annex I of the Habitats Directive, three marine species included in Annex II of the same directive, and 8 species of seabirds listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive. In total, **RN2000 currently covers approximately 21,7%** of the DM CAN.

Furthermore, the RN2000 is complemented by other protection measures, such as Marine Reserves of Fishing Interest (RMIPs), aimed at the conservation and regeneration of fishery resources. The Canary Islands have three RMIPs: La Graciosa and the Northern Islets of Lanzarote (1995), Punta de La Restinga-Mar de Las Calmas in El Hierro (1996), and the La Palma Marine Reserve (2001). These RMIPs represent less than 1% of the DM CAN and mostly overlap with the RN 2000. The proportion of fully protected areas varies considerably among them, representing 25% in the La Palma Marine Reserve, 24% in the El Hierro Marine Reserve, and only 1.7% in the La Graciosa Marine Reserve.

Currently, there are several proposals for new marine protected areas which, if implemented, would significantly expand the coverage of MPAs in the DM CAN. Among these is the proposed Mar de Las Calmas Marine National Park (PNMMC) off El Hierro, currently in the draft bill stage. This latter designation would create Spain's first marine national park, marking a historic milestone in the conservation of the island's marine environment and reinforcing the Canary Islands' role as a national leader in marine conservation. Furthermore, among other areas, the marine and coastal area west of Gran Canaria has been identified as an area of high conservation interest and is being promoted by the island government as a new National Park (Guguy National Park) in close collaboration with regional and national authorities.

To consistently assess the current status and effectiveness of MPAs in the Canary Islands, the methodological framework of The MPA Guide (developed by IUCN experts in collaboration with other organisations) has been applied.

This tool provides a clear and coherent framework for classifying and evaluating MPAs in a global context. While MPAs are fundamental for conserving marine biodiversity, their effectiveness varies widely depending on their design, level of protection, and degree of implementation. The MPA Guide categorises MPAs according to their stage of establishment and level of protection. Furthermore, it provides a common language for planning, comparing, and improving MPAs more transparently, emphasizing that the quality of protection is as important as its extent.



Marine Protected Areas in the Canary Islands Marine Demarcation

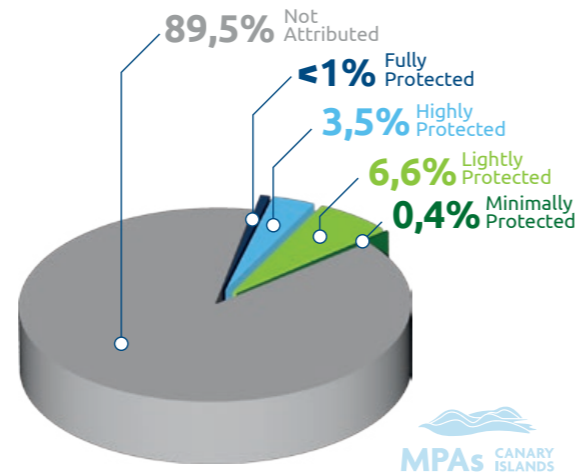
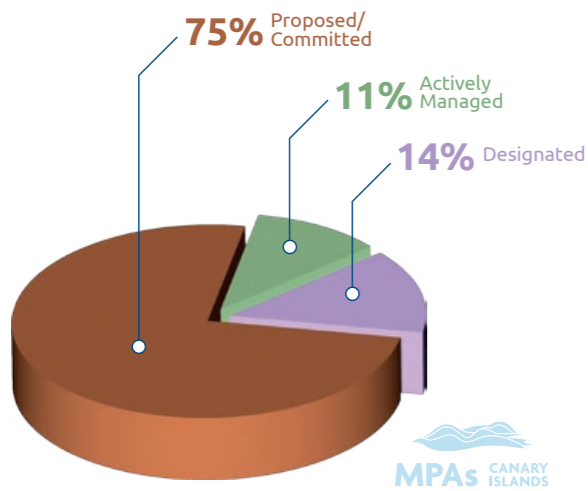
The analysis indicates that approximately **21.7%** of the Canary Islands Marine Demarcation is included within some type of Marine Protected Area (MPA) with legally binding measures. However, the degree of implementation and management effectiveness vary significantly among the different areas.

Stages of Establishment according to the MPA Guide criteria:

- **75%** of the MPAs correspond to areas where only a **proposal or commitment** exists, without legal designation or active management.
- **14%** have been **formally designated** but still lack active management measures.
- Only **11%** have active management, according to the MPA Guide criteria.

The level of protection according to the MPA Guide criteria:

- Less than **1%** of the area is fully protected.
- **3.5%** is highly protected.
- **6.6%** has moderate or light protection.
- **0.4%** is minimally protected.
- **89.5%** of the area corresponds to SCIs, which, lacking active management, cannot have their level of protection assessed.



Of the total areas considered, only a relatively small fraction corresponds to specific protection designations: **0.2%** to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), **0.4%** to Marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), **2.1%** to Special Protection Areas (SPAs), and **20.8%** to Sites of Community Importance (SCIs), including the new proposals for the sea-mounts located north and southwest of the Canary Islands.

Taken together, **these data reveal that, although the area designated as a Marine Protected Area (MPA) has increased in recent years, the levels of strict protection and management effectiveness remain very low.** This situation underscores the urgent need to strengthen governance, planning, and monitoring mechanisms in order to move towards a fully functional MPA system aligned with the marine conservation objectives set for 2030.

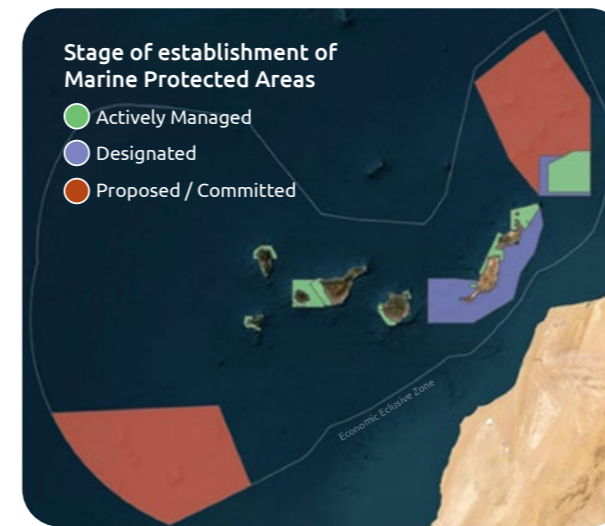


Figure 1. Stages of establishment of Marine Protected Areas in the Canary Islands Marine Demarcation, according to the MPA Guide. Green represents areas with active management, purple indicates areas that are designated, and red denotes areas in the proposal stage or officially committed.

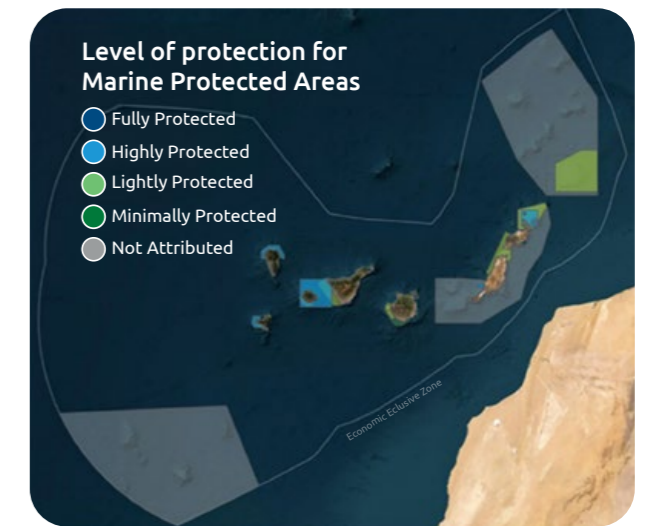
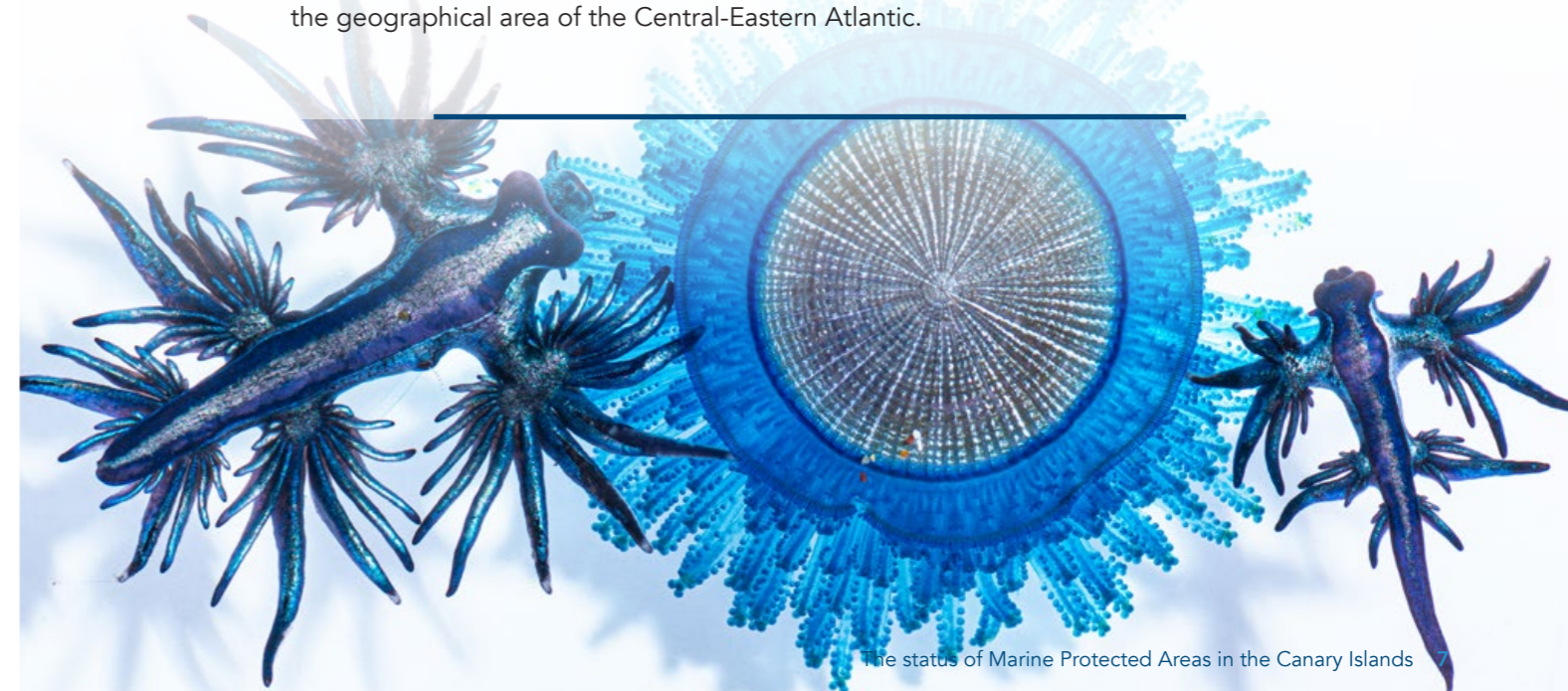


Figure 2. Level of protection for Marine Protected Areas in the Canary Marine District, according to the MPA Guide. Dark blue represents fully protected areas, light blue indicates highly protected areas, light green denotes lightly protected areas, dark green shows minimally protected areas, and grey marks areas that cannot be assigned to any of the previous categories.

Next steps

Based on this analysis, the MPAs Canary Islands project, with the support of its Expert Committee (CEXPE), has developed a strategic roadmap aimed at strengthening MPAs in the Canary Islands and supporting the competent authorities in achieving the 30x30 target. This roadmap highlights the strategic role of the Canary Islands within a coherent network of MPAs, integrating biodiversity values as well as social and economic considerations. Furthermore, the potential to move towards greater ecological connectivity and regional cooperation with the rest of the Central-Eastern Atlantic area is recognized, laying the foundations for a more integrated and resilient MPA network in the future in the geographical area of the Central-Eastern Atlantic.





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