

Evaluation and application of marine Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas in the West Indian Ocean

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Seabirds can be effective proxies for identifying priority sites for conservation because they are a group of conservation concern, and also because their distributions often overlap with other taxa, and their food webs encompass a wide diversity of marine taxa. Tracking data provide unparalleled information on seabird distribution. The BirdLife managed Global Seabird Tracking Database (www.seabirdtracking.org) is the largest collection of seabird tracking data in existence with almost 10 million data points for over 110 seabird species. BirdLife International has developed a standardised approach to analyse tracking data to identify marine Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). These sites of conservation importance at global and regional scales are based on a set of standardised, globally agreed criteria and thresholds to identify and describe key sites for conservation. IBAs can be used to inform marine management decisions, from local level marine spatial planning – including the designation of marine protected areas, to international processes, such as the CBD's description of Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas. In recent years there has been an increase in the availability of tracking data in the West Indian Ocean – both in terms of number of species and number of tracks. Alongside this there are on-going marine spatial planning processes in the region, which presents a timely opportunity to re-evaluate the existing marine IBAs and identify any new sites in the region to be able to inform these processes. Here we present the status and advancements of the Seabird Tracking Database and the network of marine IBAs in the West Indian Ocean, with a particular emphasis on the approach for identifying marine IBAs, the current major gaps, and the application to conservation processes in the region.