

The “low Hanging Fruit” – Opportunities To Expand South Africa’s MPA Estate And Protect Critical Habitats In The WIO Region

Authors : Kendyl Wright¹, Jean Harris¹

¹*Wildlands Conservation Trust*

E-mail Address: kendylw@wildtrust.co.za

ID: 12145

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Background

Oceans underpin life on earth, providing key ecosystem services – but they are facing unprecedented pressure. Marine Protected Areas provide the best mechanisms to mitigate this pressure, by protecting, restoring, and preserving biodiversity. MPAs however do not come without challenges. Historically top-down implementation of MPAs with inadequate consultation has resulted in coastal communities being excluded from MPA planning and management, a prerequisite for a successful MPA.

As countries move to expand their protected area estate and contribute to a global goal of 30% protection by 2030 (30 x 30) it is critical that it is undertaken in the context of each country, while taking into consideration regional concerns. Here we use South Africa as an example of how spatial protection goals can be achieved by diversifying protection mechanism and explore how this could be applied in the context of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO).

Method

Using key freely available spatial data sources such as the South African Critical Biodiversity Areas (CBA) map we have identified areas that require protection and fall outside of the current protected areas estate. We then assess a variety of potential mechanisms to conserve these areas, that limit impacts on local communities. This includes new ideas for the application of other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) in South Africa. These results are then contextualised in lessons from the WIO region.

Results

Currently, approximately 7% of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is protected, predominantly in the coastal zone. Within the WIO region, South Africa protects 15.5% of its EEZ including its extended shelf claim around the Prince Edward Islands. Only, 5.4% of its mainland EEZ is however protected, of which approximately 3% falls within sanctuary or no take zones. This equates to a significant proportion, ~34%, of coastline. While there are still some key coastal areas that require protection, this may be achieved by other mechanisms than formal MPAs. But it is looking offshore where the major wins in protected areas can be found, where the benefits to coastal communities far outweigh the costs. This does not preclude improving protection of critical inshore habitats and species, which may be achieved using other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), that are inherently more inclusive and less costly to implement and manage, while still achieving the necessary conservation outcomes. The use of OECMs in the form of

locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) for the protection of coastal resources is well established in Kenya and Madagascar providing some important insights for coastal protection in South Africa. While the blueprint for South Africa's large offshore MPAs, could be expanded into the WIO region, significantly improving and expanding protection.

Conclusion

It is clear that South Africa has the ability to quickly expand its protected area portfolio, achieving 10% protection rapidly within its mainland EEZ through large offshore MPAs while OECMs may offer a more inclusive mechanism for the protection of coastal biodiversity such as through co-management initiatives. However, large offshore MPAs offer the quickest mechanism for expanding the protected area estate in both South Africa and the WIO region, and could significantly contribute to the 30 x 30 goals.