Ecologically or Biologically Significant Areas (EBSA)

ACRONYMS | AREAS | COUNTRIES | MARINE | TERMS

DEFINITION

Areas which, through scientific criteria, have been identified as important for the healthy functioning of our oceans and the services that they provide.

DESCRIPTION

In 2008, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted scientific criteria for identifying ecologically or biologically significant marine areas, known as the CBD EBSA criteria. This process supports the CBD's key role in supporting the work of the UN General Assembly with regard to marine protected areas beyond national jurisdiction "by focusing on the provision of scientific and technical information and advice relating to marine biological diversity, the application of the ecosystem approach and the precautionary approach"[1].

The EBSA identification process is strictly a scientific and technical exercise that aims to inform marine spatial planning both within and beyond national jurisdiction [2]. Importantly, the identification of EBSAs and the selection of any conservation or management measures is a matter for States and competent intergovernmental organisations in accordance with international Law, particularly The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)[1].

The definition of an EBSA from the CBD decision text is: *'geographically or oceanographically discrete areas that provide important services to one or more species/populations of an ecosystem or to the ecosystem as a whole, compared to other surrounding areas or areas of similar ecological characteristics, or otherwise meet the [EBSA] criteria*".[1]

RECOGNISED BY

The Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which entered into force in 1993 to conserve biological diversity and promote sustainable development, (196 Parties to date: June 2015).

YEAR OF CREATION

EBSA criteria were adopted in 2008.

COVERAGE

The identification of EBSAs is ongoing. Regional workshops have been held in seven regions, over half of the world (CBD COP 12, Korea, October 2014). Further regional workshops are expected to identify EBSAs in the remaining area.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

The seven criteria for identifying EBSAs, of which one or more must be applicable[1], are:

- **Uniqueness or rarity**: area contains either (i) unique ("the only one of its kind"), rare (occurs only in few locations) or endemic species, populations or communities, and/or (ii) unique, rare or distinct, habitats or ecosystems; and/or (iii) unique or unusual geomorphological or oceanographic features.
- **Special importance for life history stages of species**: areas required for a population to survive and thrive.
- **Importance for threatened, endangered or declining species and/or habitats**: area containing habitat for the survival and recovery of endangered, threatened, declining species or area with significant assemblages of such species.
- **Vulnerability, fragility, sensitivity or slow recovery**: areas that contain a relatively high proportion of sensitive habitats, biotopes or species that are functionally fragile (highly susceptible to degradation or depletion by human activity or by natural events) or with slow recovery.
- **Biological productivity**: area containing species, populations or communities with comparatively higher natural biological productivity.
- **Biological diversity**: area contains comparatively higher diversity of ecosystems, habitats, communities, or species, or has higher genetic diversity.
- **Naturalness**: area with a comparatively higher degree of naturalness as a result of the lack of or low level of human-induced disturbance or degradation.

PROGRESS ON EBSA IDENTIFICATION

Initially, the EBSA process was designed to focus only on identifying ecologically or biologically significant areas in open-ocean waters and deep-sea habitats in areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction. However, EBSAs are now being identified in both areas within and beyond national jurisdiction.

Following the provision of guidance on the application of the scientific criteria, workshops have been held all over the world to identify EBSAs, and more are being organised.

CBD COP 10 (Nagoya, Japan) agreed to integrate more traditional, scientific, technical and technological knowledge of indigenous and local communities into the identification of EBSAs.

Capacity building for the EBSA process was supported by the Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI) [3], a partnership between countries and experts to facilitate the achievement of the CBD Aichi Biodiversity Targets. An EBSA repository and information-sharing mechanism is currently available online at http://www.cbd.int/ebsa/.

The ongoing EBSA process will include more regional workshops and additional sharing of information through the EBSA repository.

MANAGEMENT

Management of EBSAs, including their identification and any appropriate conservation measures, is solely the responsibility of States and competent intergovernmental organisations in accordance with international law.

BUSINESS RELEVANCE

Legal - The CBD has highlighted that identification of EBSAs is a scientific and technical exercise and does not imply an economic or legally protected status [4]. The identification of EBSAs and any appropriate conservation measures are solely the responsibility of States and intergovernmental organisations in accordance with international law. As such, Parties and other competent authorities may choose to apply the EBSA criteria within their national jurisdiction and beyond, and can use the identification of EBSAs to assist in the implementation of conservation and management measures, including establishing a network of officially designated marine protected areas [1]. Within national jurisdictions, there are already cases of national EBSA description processes informing the selection of areas for MPA designation (e.g. Canada, Australia, Japan) [2]. It is feasible that in the long term protection could be granted to EBSAs outside national jurisdiction through conventions or other international agreements, such as UNCLOS or Regional Seas Conventions [2].

Biodiversity – The identification of an EBSA highlights the fact that the area has considerable biodiversity importance. This is relevant for businesses in terms of mitigating and avoiding risk from

biodiversity loss and identifying opportunities associated with biodiversity conservation. The criteria under which EBSAs are designated significantly overlap with the criteria for other designations such as PSSAs, IBAs and VMEs[2].

Table 1: Correspondence between CBD EBSA and other criteria for site identification or designation (Adapted from Dunn et al 2014)[2]

Organisation	CBD	FAO	IMO	UNESCO	Ramsar	Birdlife	IUCN
Site Criteria	EBSA	VME	PSSA	WHS	RAMSAR	IBA	KBA
Uniqueness or rarity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Special importance for life history stages of species	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Importance to threatened or endangered species	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vulnerability, fragility, sensitivity or slow recovery	✓	✓	✓	✗	?	✗	?
Productivity	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	?
Biodiversity	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	?
Naturalness	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	?
Structure	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	?
Historical geomorphological importance	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗

Additionally, the EBSA criteria overlap with some criteria for ‘natural’ or ‘critical’ habitat designations under the International Finance Corporation’s (IFC) Performance Standard 6 (PS6)[5], which may limit the type of activities possible or require extensive mitigation. For example, unique ecosystems, highly biodiverse areas, and habitats that are important for threatened or endangered species are all part of the criteria for both EBSAs and IFC PS6. Furthermore, the degree of threat and sensitivity of an area is also addressed under both criteria.

Socio-cultural – EBSAs can exist in both areas within and beyond national jurisdiction. Those that are identified in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ), which are beyond the Economic Exclusion Zone boundaries (usually beyond 200nm from the coastline), are likely to be in locations inaccessible to people. For this reason, they are less likely to be highly culturally resonant. However, by protecting specific life stages or movement patterns of species, they can offer protection to species that often hold strong cultural linkages.
The inclusion of territorial waters in the EBSA process has highlighted the need to include social

and cultural criteria in the selection of EBSAs. The long-term viability of conservation initiatives is often governed by the social conditions of a particular area. In particular, a report highlighting elements for the integration of traditional local knowledge into the establishment of EBSAs was produced for COP 11 [6] The elements highlighted in the report include current and traditional use of areas; cultural heritage; social acceptability; the recognition of the importance on building on pre-existing systems of traditional resource management; and the use of traditional ecological knowledge. Parties and other relevant organisations were invited to incorporate these elements in the description of new EBSAs and in the subsequent step of selecting any conservation and management measures [7].

REFERENCES & WEBSITE

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Category:

Biodiversity designations

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