



FACTSHEET

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# GIFT TO THE EARTH

## First High Seas Marine Protected Areas in the North Atlantic

OSPAR

### Summary & Background



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Coral garden on seamount in North Atlantic. Seamounts are oases of the open ocean, rich in marine life, and provide a stop over for migratory species such as whales, turtles and tuna, and host congregations of deep sea fish, all vulnerable to impacts of human activities.

Coherent and ecologically representative networks of high seas marine protected areas (HSMPAs) are an important tool for protecting the rich and often vulnerable biodiversity of the 70% of our oceans that lie beyond national jurisdiction.

The North-East Atlantic is rich in marine wildlife, including cetaceans, sharks and rays, orange roughy and other deepwater fish, and vulnerable marine ecosystems such as cold-water coral reefs, coral gardens, sponge aggregations, seamounts and hydrothermal vent fields, many of which have been identified as threatened and declining due to high fishing pressure and impacts from other human activities.

During the last decade, the OSPAR Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic has endorsed important commitments to protect offshore marine biological diversity by establishing a network of MPAs. While OSPAR Contracting Parties were encouraged to nominate sites within their territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) to such a network it remained up to OSPAR as a whole to complement these efforts with additional high seas MPAs in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

This work has now begun to bear fruit, and the establishment of the first high seas MPAs in the North Atlantic, including four seamount protected areas as well as part of the ecologically important and sizeable Charlie-Gibbs Fracture Zone MPA, are a testimony to the groundbreaking work of OSPAR and sets a precedent for other regions in working towards meeting the World Summit on Sustainable Development and CBD goal of implementing representative systems of MPAs by 2012.

## The Path to Success

In 2008, OSPAR Contracting Parties agreed in principle to establish the first high seas MPA in the North-East Atlantic – the Charlie-Gibbs Fracture Zone – with a view to making it legally binding and operational at its 2010 Ministerial Meeting. The MPA comprises a large section of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, between Iceland and the Azores, creating a towering east-west barrier with certain peaks rising more than 3,500m above the Atlantic abyssal plain.

OSPAR drew up conservation objectives for the Charlie-Gibbs MPA and also identified additional candidate sites for high seas MPAs, of which five were selected and nominated for adoption: the Mid-Atlantic Ridge north of the Azores as well as the Milne, Altair, Antialtair and Josephine seamounts (see map).

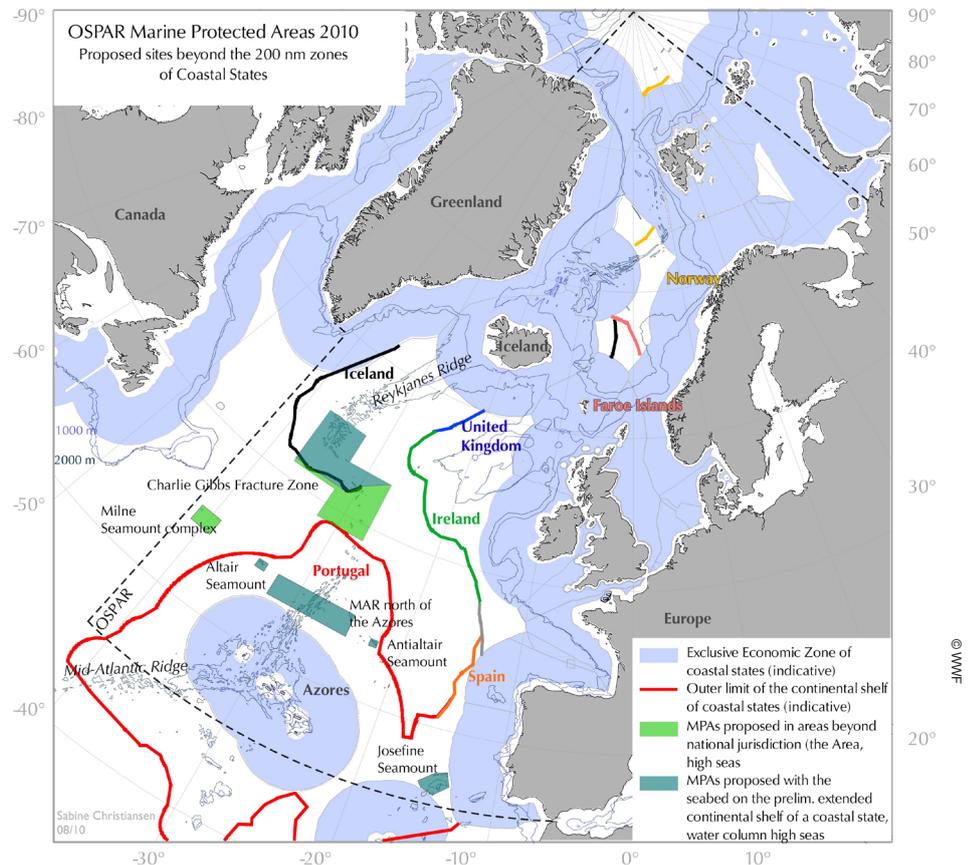
Thus, a first tranche of HSMPAs was created with a view to completing the regional network once certain legal issues are resolved. At the end of this process, the MPAs are expected to cover more than 450,000 sq km, or 8% of OSPAR's high seas.

OSPAR is actively cooperating with other international authorities to put management measures in place in the MPAs, and is seeking solutions to the delicate question of a joint conservation and management approach where a coastal state claims the seabed and its resources beyond 200 nautical miles while the water bodies above are high seas. Both endeavours are highly innovative and are expected to serve as a blueprint for other Regional Seas Conventions.

OSPAR's actions constitute an international milestone in high seas conservation and governance. WWF recognizes this as a Gift to the Earth – a globally significant conservation action which demonstrates environmentally responsible leadership and is an inspiration to others.

## Outlook

This process has led to a unique collaboration between this Regional Seas Convention and the relevant authorities, fostering correspondence and draft agreements on management measures with the International Seabed



Authority (ISA), International Maritime Organization (IMO), North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). Prior to the establishment of the new HSMPAs, NEAFC had decided to close most of the areas to destructive bottom trawling on a temporary basis, partly in line with commitments arising from the UN GA Resolutions on Sustainable Fishing.

The unique co-operation between single coastal states, OSPAR and other intergovernmental bodies concerned is setting an important precedent and lesson to be shared with other regional seas - demonstrating it is possible to identify priority areas on the high seas, set conservation objectives and generate the political will for the management of human activities in parts of the oceans "far out and deep under".

## Conservation Benefits

While the single biggest fishing threat to bottom communities and sponge aggregations has been mitigated preliminarily, it is hoped that the formal

establishment of the network of HSMPAs will lead to a permanent protection from destructive fishing practices, as well as new measures to protect pelagic and deepwater fish stocks, exclude mining and other extractive industries, reduce risks from shipping, conduct deep sea research in an environmentally responsible manner, and secure the migratory routes and feeding grounds of marine mammals, turtles and oceanic seabirds.

### For More Information

Stephan Lutter, WWF Germany  
stephan.lutter@wwf.de

The **Gift to the Earth** is WWF's recognition of a globally significant conservation achievement, which addresses WWF's conservation priorities in globally significant natural areas by:

- Advancing conservation of biodiversity, especially forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems, or enhancing the prospects for survival of threatened species.
- Addressing global threats posed by climate change, toxic chemicals and unsustainable use of resources such as timber, freshwater and fisheries.

### Contact

Rob Soutter +41 22 364 9290,  
rsoutter@wwfint.org

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