



SSA

DIGITAL VISION

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WWF works to reconcile the needs of people  
with the conservation of the natural  
environment upon which they depend.

## WWF recommendations

- All those with a stake in protecting their coastal and marine environments should encourage their governments to propose PSSAs to the IMO.
- Coastal nations should involve coastal managers and communities in identifying candidate areas and preparing proposals for PSSA identification and protection for submission to the IMO.
- Where a sensitive and vulnerable site is shared by two or more countries, they should work together on a proposal and develop joint protective measures.
- Coastal nations should work within the IMO to ensure that the process for PSSA identification is kept simple and speedy, rather than cumbersome and slow.

### Further reading:

WWF brochure:  
*Marine Protected Areas*,  
November 1998

Marine Update 29:  
*Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas*  
February 1997

Marine Update 24:  
*Shipping and the Environment:  
Assessing the Risks*  
February 1996

COVER PHOTOS: OIL SLICK BIRD – DIGITAL VISION POLLUTION CLEAN-UP – PAUL GLENDELL/WWF-UK OIL ON BEACH SIGN – J PLANT/WWF-UK DOLPHIN – DIGITAL VISION

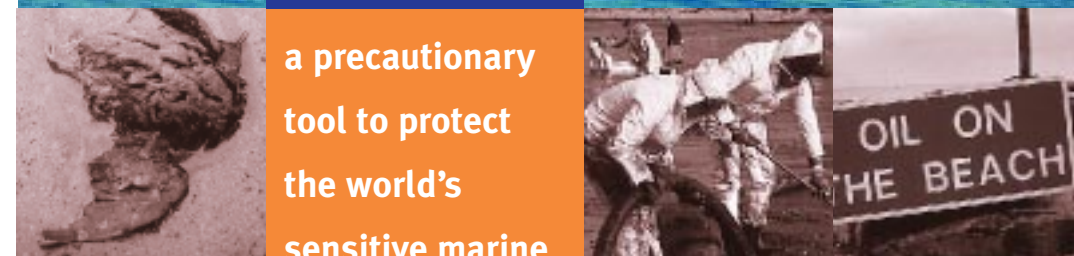


living seas

## PSSAs

### Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas

a precautionary  
tool to protect  
the world's  
sensitive marine  
ecosystems from  
shipping impacts  
such as oil spills,  
ship groundings,  
anchor damage  
and rubbish.







**Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSAs) are areas of the seas and oceans that need special protection through action by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) because of their ecological, economic, cultural or scientific significance, and their vulnerability to harmful impacts from shipping activities.**

PSSAs can benefit valuable ecosystems such as coral reefs, coastal wetlands and important habitats. They are also important for migrating birds, sea turtles, whales or other marine species, as well as feeding grounds for valuable fish stocks. In addition, they can benefit marine areas of particular importance for tourism, recreation, traditional subsistence, science or education. And if any of the above areas are close to shipping lanes, suffer from bad weather, have narrow passages, shallow depths or submerged reefs, or are otherwise sensitive to shipping impacts, then they may need PSSA assistance to protect them.

International law limits the ability of coastal nations to impose and enforce their own environmental and navigation regulations on foreign ships passing through their waters. Within their 12-mile territorial waters, coastal nations may not ‘impair’ a foreign ship’s right of innocent passage. Beyond the territorial seas, in the Exclusive Economic Zone or equivalent extending out to 200 miles from the shore, coastal states can only adopt regulations that have been previously approved by the IMO. As such, international regulations are generally meant to apply to all ships everywhere they go. Thus it can be difficult to protect discrete areas of the marine environment that are particularly sensitive. However, through PSSAs, area-specific rules can be matched to local needs and conditions.

PSSAs can help coastal nations prevent accidents, avoid habitat damage and stop intentional pollution by regulating the passage of ships through or away from sensitive areas. The marking of PSSAs on nautical charts also serves to inform mariners of the

need to take special care when approaching a sensitive area. Some of the measures available through the IMO to protect PSSAs include:

**Areas to be Avoided** to prohibit entry of tankers or other ships carrying hazardous cargoes

**Traffic separation schemes** to require ships to stay within designated lanes

**Inshore traffic zones and deep water routes** to separate local traffic from transiting traffic

**Special discharge restrictions** under MARPOL 73/78 to ban the discharge of oily wastes, garbage and other harmful substances from ships

**Pilotage requirements** to ensure ships use local pilots who are expert local navigators

**Mandatory reporting requirements** to ensure two-way communication between ship and shore

**Vessel traffic management service systems** to help manage and control ships’ passage

Special innovative measures may also be introduced to address specific local problems.

A PSSA can be a useful management tool to protect nationally designated marine protected areas that are vulnerable to shipping impacts. However, PSSAs do not have to be restricted to national marine protected areas: they can also protect other ecologically, economically, or socially significant marine areas that are exposed to threats from shipping. The global publicity generated through PSSA identification can sometimes benefit the area further by stimulating efforts to protect it from other potentially harmful maritime activities such as drilling, dredging and fishing, or land-based operations that cause pollution or wetlands destruction, for example.

Two countries have already benefited from having PSSAs identified. In 1991 the IMO approved its first PSSA – Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. Australia was thus able to require all ships transiting through treacherous reef passages to use local pilots, and accidents in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park have been drastically reduced as a result. And Cuba’s Cabana-Samaguey Archipelago was identified as a PSSA in 1998 to complement the country’s national strategy to manage all threats to this ecologically unique and economically valuable area. Other coastal nations with important marine areas that are vulnerable to shipping impacts can petition the IMO to have them recognised as PSSAs.

IMO guidelines\* provide the criteria and procedure for identification of a PSSA. A petition will need to show that the area is significant in at least one of the criteria listed in Box 1:

**Box 1**

**PSSA Criteria**

**Ecological:** uniqueness, dependency, representativeness, diversity, productivity, naturalness, integrity, vulnerability

**Social, Cultural and Economic:** economic benefit, recreation, human dependency

**Scientific and Educational:** research, baselines and monitoring studies, education, historical value

If it is to be successful, a petition should include an assessment of the area’s vulnerability to damage by shipping activities, identify proposed measures to protect the area, and explain how those measures will work. It should further describe the oceanographic and ecological conditions that make the area sensitive to shipping impacts and indicate any other sources of environmental pressure that increase that sensitivity.

Some countries such as Australia and New Zealand have used coastal managers and communities to assist in identifying areas that deserve greater protection and are at risk from shipping activity. They know that all those with a stake in protecting the

coastal and marine environment should be involved in decisions regarding ways to minimise the environmental impact of shipping. These concerned sources can also provide much of the information needed to develop an effective IMO petition.

**Box 2**

**Major benefits of PSSAs**

**PSSAs enable coastal states to:**  
Gain global publicity for the significance of an area

Inform mariners of the need to take special care when transiting the area

Regulate shipping through IMO measures to protect the area

Adopt innovative measures based on the specific needs of the area

Provide protection based on the needs of an ecosystem

Protect the economic values of an area such as fish farms, important tourist beaches and fisheries

Stimulate national and local action to provide more comprehensive protection

Despite the clear benefits of PSSA identification, countries have been slow to take advantage of this tool.

*Text provided by Kristina Gjerde*



PHOTO – J PLANT/WWF-UK

★ The Guidelines for Designation of Special Areas and Identification of Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas IMO Assembly Resolution A.720(17)