

Protecting Blue Horizons

Head of a marine conservation organization

One possible scenario: Along the western coast of an island in a temperate sea, a species rich ecosystem needs urgent protection. As a result, also the octopus population, a commercially important species for the local fishers can recover. Overfishing, particularly from destructive bottom trawling, pollution and invasive species, strain the ecosystems. In order to protect fish and octopus nursery areas and allow the juvenile individuals to grow, a Marine Protected Area (MPA) is being planned.

NB Another scenario can be chosen for all to fit your context better, applicable to all. See fictional map or use a map of a coastal area close by to help visualise the conflict areas between different interests.

MPAs are geographically distinct zones which aim at safeguarding the biodiversity through habitat protection, maintaining marine ecosystem healthy or restore them to a healthy state for the supply of ecosystem products and services. They are fundamental because they help to release the pressure on the habitats and on the species. Indeed, many human activities and all the phenomena linked to the climate change put a huge pressure on ecosystems.

Imagine being the head of an organization which is involved in ecosystem conservation projects in this Sicilian coastal region (or another location chosen for the role play). You have campaigned and are getting close to the objective of widening the protection of the Italian waters through the designation of a new MPA. You are now working to build stronger consensus around that. Indeed, you know that the simple declaration of an MPA will not ensure effective protection. Implementation is the real goal. The MPA must be more than a spot on a map to ensure that species and habitats are truly protected. Your organization does not want “paper parks”.

What you now aim for is a **strictly protected MPA** which will put in place the highest level of safeguard, prohibiting all industrial, extractive and destructive uses and activities that disturb marine life and habitats. These kinds of areas are most commonly defined as “**No-Take Zones**”. Indeed, trawling still goes in 60% of European MPAs and this must stop! You challenge the claims of the industrial fishers and their EuroPêche lobby that they feed Europe. Fact is Europe has to import at least 70% of its consumption of fishery products because mostly industrial overfishing has almost halved production in European waters in less than 10 years. (Similar trends are visible in other marine regions)

No-Take Zones significantly increase biodiversity by multiplying up to 6 times the abundance of fish, compared to unprotected waters. They increase fecundity and act as nurseries for eggs, larvae, and juveniles. Moreover, by creating more complex ecosystems, No-Take Zones are more resilient to climate change and respond better to stress factors than disturbed ones.

You are collecting support through a petition for the planned MPA to be strictly protected.

You will explain that without strong protection measures, the fish and octopus populations will not manage to recover. A strictly protected MPA is the only measure to ensure marine biodiversity, fish and food provisioning in the surrounding areas, jobs and livelihood for artisanal fishers and rebuild ecosystems resilience. A useful indicator is a high biomass of fish species **bigger than the minimum reproductive size**. You get this information from www.fishbase.org (for all fish species, or easier from the FishBase Guide app, Google Play Store) and www.sealifebase.org (for other marine organisms).



You are not completely happy with the scuba diving tourism business, but could live with a reduced level provided the boats are only anchoring in a special mooring area and divers adhere to a precautionary diving protocol.

You will argue that the consequences of the construction of an offshore wind farm in the planned MPA are not well understood. There must be an environmental impact assessment before issuing any license. Marine life can undergo potential harm during and after the construction phase. Indeed, the noise produced by the turbines, the excavating process to install the electric cables and the possible risks of earthquakes make the realization of the wind farm a hazardous project. Moreover, if the turbines are built too close to the coastline, the rocky sea bottom, which is a fundamental nursery area for the octopus, will be compromised.