



Fostering Ecosystem-Based Marine Spatial Planning in the Azores

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Research context

Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) is the main governance process that ideally balances economic, ecological and socio-cultural goals through the regulation of human uses at sea. With the global and regional conservation and green energy targets ahead, there is an urgent need to better align MSP and strategic conservation planning, hence the operationalisation of an ecosystem approach to MSP. The EU-funded project MarinePlan supports the implementation of ecosystem-based MSP through the development of a Decision Support System (DSS). To inform the DSS, research has been conducted on the effectiveness of current governance regimes across eight European study sites, including the Azores. Through an institutional and policy audit, supported by interviews and a questionnaire survey with key marine actors, detailed information has been developed on the barriers and enablers of adaptive marine governance in each region.

Governance targets and objectives

The adoption of the National Maritime Spatial Planning Situation Plan for the Azores, in addition to the approval of Decreto Legislativo Regional nº 14/2024/A, represent a decisive step in regional marine conservation. Additionally, the current Network of Marine Protected Areas of the Azores (RAMPA) achieved the target of protecting 30% of the Azores' marine environment and Extended Economic Zone (EEZ). However, despite this success, there remains several governance challenges that must be considered and addressed to ensure that the wider governance objectives and targets of the Azores are adequately achieved. These barriers to accomplishing progress, as well as proposed solutions to overcome them, are listed on the following page.

Barriers to achieving targets and recommendations



Barrier #1 – Political complexity between national and regional government is hindering the coherence and connectivity of MSP

Recommendation – Promote legal harmonisation through strengthened intergovernmental dialogue, a clarification of competencies, and a greater focus on participation. This will help to minimise complexity. To empower the regional plan, the Azores should be granted a more active role in the definition of marine policies, such as MSP, to ensure that governance arrangements adequately fit local issues.



Barrier #2 – Establishing trade-offs between marine conservation and economic activities requires adaptive governance and effective policy integration

Recommendation – Develop indicators to assess the compatibility of economic activities with conservation objectives. Support should be provided to assist the transition towards more sustainable activities, such as sustainable fisheries and eco-tourism. This may create new economic opportunities.



Barrier #3 – MPA designation did not include the most recent research knowledge on biodiversity, ecosystem services and the impacts of climate change

Recommendation – Regular re-assessment of sites, based on the most up-to-date knowledge, is key. MPA management must become more flexible, particularly in regard to the process of designating and implementing sites. Expand research initiatives to ensure that data will enhance adaptive management and inform policy adjustments. This should include acquiring data on the economic impacts of MPAs.



Barrier #4 – Monitoring mechanisms have been insufficient in evaluating MPA effectiveness. Robust, science-based tracking of key indicators is needed

Recommendation – Establish clear evaluation protocols based on SMART indicators to demonstrate MPA performance against design objectives. This should be supported by the creation of specific funding mechanisms for continuous MPA monitoring. Incentives to participate in the monitoring should be provided to economic actors, for example by swiftly reflecting monitoring results in fishing quotas.



Barrier #5 – The large extent and oceanic nature of the Azores MPA network make it difficult to adequately perform surveillance and enforcement

Recommendation – Improving MPA enforcement is required, including the need to clarify enforcement provisions and sanctions, as well providing greater resources. Integrating technology (e.g., remote surveillance) and facilitating inter-departmental data-sharing among enforcement entities is key. Training for local authorities and campaigns to promote adherence to regulations should also be supported.



Barrier #6 – Excessive number of ineffective and top-down public consultation processes that fail to represent stakeholder input, leading to stakeholder fatigue

Recommendation – Establish a structured, ongoing dialogue through multi-stakeholder forums. The effectiveness of consultation meetings should be optimized so that less meetings are needed, but the suggestions and points of view of the different stakeholders are better integrated and taken into account.

More information

To read more on MarinePlan's recommendations for the Azores, click on the below links to an ArcGIS StoryMap, Deliverable reports, and a publication presenting an EB-MSP assessment tool:

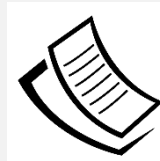
[ArcGIS StoryMap](#)

'Fostering ecosystem-based MSP in the Azores'



[Deliverable 4.1](#)

'Report on existing policies and institutions'



[Deliverable 4.2](#)

'Report on adaptive capacity of governance'



[EB-MSP Assessment Tool](#)

'Assessment tool to address implementation challenges of EBM principles in MSP processes'



References

ArcGIS StoryMap – <https://arcg.is/1Lbvay0>

Deliverable 4.1 – doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10829632

Deliverable 4.2 – doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13862281

EB-MSP Assessment Tool – doi.org/10.1038/s43247-024-01975-7

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