

Key-note Theme 3

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Establishment of marine protected areas in Norway

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Abstract

A system or set of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) is under establishment in Norway. This is the final stage of a long process that has run for about 20 years. In the late 1980s a national working group was established with the task to consider strategies and criteria for identifying potential MPAs. This was followed by an expert group that worked during the first half of the 1990s. This group compiled and reviewed information on species distribution patterns in Norway and proposed a set of candidate sites for establishment of MPAs. After this there was a pause for political consideration, with a government white paper and discussion in the Norwegian parliament on the relationship between area protection and use in the coastal zone. The parliament established guidance for the further process, including that the protection should not be stricter than necessary and that combinations of protection and use should be sought where possible. An advisory group with representatives from government agencies, fishing and aquaculture industries, and green NGOs was established in 2001 to select areas from a candidate list and provide advice on the conservation purposes, types of protection, and restrictions on activities in the proposed MPAs. The advisory group gave its advice in 2004. This has been considered by the Ministry of Environment in consultation with other ministries and with input from different government agencies. The plan is now being prepared for an open hearing process, with the aim to formally establish the MPAs in 2008.

The proposed plan includes establishment of 36 MPAs ranging in size from about 5 km² to >3,000 km². Most of the areas are located in the coastal zone within the territorial waters (12 nautical miles from the baseline). The total area of the 36 proposed MPAs is about 16,000 km² and they constitute about 7% of the sea area in the coastal and territorial waters. In the final evaluation and prioritisation of the MPAs selected in the national plan, the MPAs were grouped in 6 categories: i) polls, ii) areas with strong currents, iii) shallow water areas, iv) fjords, v) open coastal areas, and vi) transects from the coast across the shelf or offshore areas on the shelf. The two most important selection criteria were representativeness and uniqueness. The advisory

group considered the plan to include a well-balanced and fairly complete selection of typical and special sub-sea nature types in Norwegian coastal and territorial waters.

The main conservation purpose for most of the proposed MPAs is to protect the seafloor underwater landscape (the seascape) from physical impacts, thereby protecting the associated species diversity which to a large extent has not been mapped to any material extent. Utilization of the living resources in a sustainable manner with gears that do not impact the landscape is suggested allowed in the MPAs. However, monitoring and control need to be established to secure that the use is not degrading the conservation values over time. Detailed mapping of the MPAs should be carried out and maps should be included in management plans for each individual MPA. Establishment of reference areas within some of the MPAs, where use of specific fishing gears are prohibited, may be used to improve assessments of the impacts of fishing gears and help us to achieve sustainability of the wider marine areas outside MPAs.