



Staff Report

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Item 8

Informational Item:

Evaluation Criteria for 30x30 Conservation Areas in California's Coastal Waters

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Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 3: Enhance Coastal and Marine Biodiversity;
Objective 3.1: Protect and Restore Coastal and Marine Ecosystems

Exhibits:

Exhibit A: List of Candidate 30x30 Conservation Areas in California's coastal waters

Executive Summary:

In October 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom issued Executive Order N-82-20, which committed California to conserving 30% of its lands and coastal waters by 2030 (the "30x30" or "30 by 30" target). In June 2025, OPC adopted a [Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in California's Coastal Waters](#), which builds on California's *Pathways to 30x30* strategy, recognizes multiple types of coastal and marine areas as 30x30 Conservation Areas, and identifies the key ways in which California will achieve 30x30 in coastal waters. To support the evaluation and designation of 30x30 Conservation Areas in coastal waters, the *Roadmap* includes a decision tree intended to translate California's definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area into objective, transparent criteria.

While OPC has already used publicly available, science-based assessments to qualify specific types of coastal and marine areas as 30x30 Conservation Areas via this decision tree, other types of areas – Tribal Stewardship Areas, lightly protected marine protected areas (MPAs) that are not part of the state's MPA network, and non-MPA areas – require more detailed and case-by-case evaluation. This informational item presents the criteria that OPC and partners will use to conduct that evaluation. For lightly protected MPAs and non-MPA areas, **criteria focus on the extent to which such areas provide functionally equivalent protection to fully or highly protected MPAs,**

which have the greatest potential to protect biodiversity, support climate resilience, and benefit both ecosystems and people. Tribal Stewardship Areas merit a different approach that respects tribal sovereignty, and **criteria for these areas focus on durable co-stewardship agreements between tribes and the State of California and management plans focused on biodiversity conservation.**

Results of OPC’s evaluation will be shared at the second quarterly Council meeting in 2026 and included in the next annual *Pathways to 30x30* progress report. This evaluation will drive significant progress on key strategies outlined in the *Roadmap* and will also result in the development of recommendations to strengthen protections, where necessary, to better improve biodiversity conservation and increase the total area of coastal waters conserved as California moves closer to the 30x30 initiative’s target date.

Background:

California’s 30x30 Goal and OPC’s Roadmap to Achieving 30x30

In October 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom issued [Executive Order N-82-20](#), which advanced environmental conservation as an Administration priority and elevated the role of nature in combatting climate change. A cornerstone of this Executive Order committed California to conserving 30% of its lands and coastal waters by 2030 (the “30x30” or “30 by 30” target) – placing our state on the leading edge of an international movement to protect and restore nature.

Following Governor Newsom’s Executive Order, in 2022, the California Natural Resources Agency released [Pathways to 30x30](#), a groundbreaking strategy that defines 30x30 Conservation Areas, highlights the breadth of conservation that is consistent with this definition, and establishes 10 pathways to achieve 30x30 in California. *Pathways to 30x30* defines 30x30 Conservation Areas as “land and coastal water areas that are durably protected and managed to sustain functional ecosystems, both intact and restored, and the diversity of life that they support.”

In June 2025, OPC adopted a [Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in California’s Coastal Waters](#), which builds on *Pathways to 30x30*. The Roadmap applies California’s definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area to coastal waters, recognizing multiple types of coastal and marine areas – Tribal Stewardship Areas, formal Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and areas that are not formal MPAs but are managed in ways that achieve significant biodiversity benefit – as 30x30 Conservation Areas, bringing total area of coastal waters conserved to 21.9%. It also identifies four key ways in which California will conserve an additional 275,000 acres of coastal waters by 2030: 1) sustaining ongoing adaptive management of the state’s marine protected area (MPA) network, 2) strengthening biodiversity conservation in National Marine Sanctuaries, 3) supporting tribally-led

conservation, and 4) exploring the role of other coastal and marine designations in conserving biodiversity.

The *Roadmap* encourages an inclusive approach to conservation in coastal waters and prioritizes actions that help people and nature thrive together. This means that achieving 30x30 in coastal waters can both protect ecosystems and allow sustainably managed recreational activities such as fishing, boating, and diving, so long as those activities have minimal impacts on biodiversity.

Evaluation of Candidate 30x30 Conservation Areas:

Evaluation Process and Data Sources

California’s coastal waters are a complex mosaic of over 400 overlapping individual sites, or “marine managed areas,” that vary widely in purpose, protection, managing agency, and biodiversity benefits. More information on these areas can be found via the publicly available [ProtectedSeas Navigator](#) tool, which is the most comprehensive database available for marine managed areas across the globe. With the adoption of the *Roadmap*, OPC has initiated a site-by-site evaluation of the areas in the ProtectedSeas database to determine which are consistent with the state’s strong definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area, and which are not.

To support this evaluation, the *Roadmap* includes a decision tree intended to translate both essential elements of the definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area – durable protection and biodiversity benefit – into objective, transparent criteria. For example, the decision tree uses [The MPA Guide](#), a science-based tool to identify different types of MPAs and their expected outcomes for biodiversity, to evaluate the level of biodiversity protection provided by an MPA. To ensure transparency, OPC is using publicly available, science-based MPA Guide assessments from the global [Marine Protection Atlas](#) to determine levels of protection for MPAs in the ProtectedSeas database.

Fully or highly protected MPAs, which allow only light extractive or destructive activities, have the greatest potential to protect biodiversity, support climate resilience, and benefit both ecosystems and people. This category of MPAs meets California’s definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area and includes the state’s MPA network, which functions as one cohesive highly protected site, as well as some coastal reserves, National Estuarine Research Reserves, and coastal National Monuments. Minimally protected MPAs, which allow significant extractive or destructive activities, do not meet California’s definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area. This category of MPAs currently includes California’s federally-managed National Marine Sanctuaries, with the important exception of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, which is more appropriately considered a Tribal Stewardship Area due to its explicit and binding framework for collaborative co-stewardship

between the federal government, state government, and Chumash tribes, as well as its management focus on tribal priorities for biodiversity conservation.

The decision tree requires additional, more detailed assessment for three specific types of areas: tribal stewardship areas, lightly protected MPAs that are not part of the state’s MPA network, and non-MPA areas.

Tribal Stewardship Areas, or areas that are formally and collaboratively managed, stewarded, and cared for by California Native American tribes in ways that achieve significant biodiversity benefits, meet commitments made in *Pathways to 30x30* and can qualify as 30x30 Conservation Areas if a formal co-stewardship agreement is in place between managing tribes and the State of California, and if the area has a management plan that supports biodiversity conservation.

Lightly protected MPAs allow some extractive or destructive activities; MPAs in this category may meet California’s definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area *if and only if* they can demonstrate biodiversity protection that is functionally equivalent to a fully or highly protected MPA. Similarly, non-MPA areas such as fisheries management areas or areas designated to improve water quality may meet California’s definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area *if and only if* they provide meaningful ecosystem-level protection that is functionally equivalent to the protection provided by a fully or highly protected MPA.

Because of this need for additional scrutiny, many areas in the ProtectedSeas database have not yet been fully assessed for consistency with California’s definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area. Please refer to [Exhibit A](#) for a complete list of candidate 30x30 Conservation Areas in California’s coastal waters, summarized from the ProtectedSeas database, as well as the current status of OPC’s evaluation of these areas.

Detailed Evaluation Criteria

Tribal Stewardship Areas, lightly protected MPAs that are not part of the state’s MPA network, and non-MPA areas must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to understand how these areas are conserving biodiversity in the face of localized threats and pressures. This is especially important for California’s coastal waters because tools such as The MPA Guide and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) guidance on “Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures,” or areas that are not formal protected areas but are managed in ways that achieve significant biodiversity benefits, are intended for global use and therefore require careful application to California’s unique management context. This includes detailed assessment of the intensity and scale of human activities that may impact biodiversity.

In evaluating Tribal Stewardship Areas, OPC will consider the following questions:

- **Is there a formal co-stewardship agreement in place between tribe(s) and the State of California?**

YES: Tribes and the State of California have entered into a meaningful, durable, and explicit framework for collaborative stewardship of the Tribal Stewardship Area.

NO: Tribes and the State of California have not yet entered into a meaningful, durable, and explicit framework for collaborative stewardship of the Tribal Stewardship Area.

- **Does the area have a management plan that supports biodiversity conservation?**

YES: the Tribal Stewardship Area has a management plan that clearly demonstrates how stewardship activities (e.g. research and monitoring, restoration, cultural activities) directly support biodiversity conservation.

- **NO:** the Tribal Stewardship Area does not yet have a management plan, or the management plan does not clearly demonstrate how stewardship activities (e.g. research and monitoring, restoration, cultural activities) directly support biodiversity conservation.

In evaluating lightly protected MPAs that are not part of the state MPA network, OPC will consider the following questions:

- **Is the MPA operational and does it have a management plan that supports biodiversity conservation?**

YES: the MPA's stage of establishment is "implemented" or "actively managed" per the MPA Guide, and the MPA has a management plan that directly supports biodiversity conservation.

NO: the MPA's stage of establishment is either "proposed" or "designated" per the MPA Guide, and/or the MPA does not have a management plan that supports biodiversity conservation.

- **Is the MPA adequately protected from extractive or destructive activities that have the potential to negatively impact biodiversity?**

YES: extractive or destructive activities in the MPA are having minimal total impact on biodiversity. The following seven types of extractive or destructive activities are identified in The MPA Guide as factors that may impact biodiversity:

- No **mining, mineral, oil, and/or gas prospecting** or exploitation is allowed.
- No **dredging or dumping** is occurring, unless it is for restoration purposes (e.g. to maintain natural access between a wetland and the ocean).
- If any **anchoring** is happening, it is low impact, small scale, and for short duration. In general, the majority of anchoring in California’s coastal waters, e.g. anchoring associated with recreational boating, fishing, or diving, has minimal impact on biodiversity.
- If any **infrastructure** exists or is proposed within the MPA, it is low impact and small scale (e.g. fixed moorings or channel markers, but not renewable energy structures).
- If any **aquaculture** is allowed within the MPA, it is low impact (e.g. small-scale seaweed and shellfish aquaculture).
- Only **fishing** gear and fishing activities that do not significantly impact biodiversity are allowed.
- Generally, **non-extractive uses** that support equitable access (e.g. swimming, snorkeling, diving, kayaking, surfing, wildlife viewing) are considered to have minimal to low impact on biodiversity in California’s coastal marine ecosystems.

NO: extractive or destructive activities in the MPA are having moderate to significant impact on biodiversity.

In evaluating non-MPA areas, OPC will consider the following questions:

- **Does the area provide ecosystem-scale protection?**

YES: the area was designed and is managed to protect entire ecosystems.

NO: the area was designed and is managed to protect only a single species or species group, or a particular resource (e.g. a slow speed area designed to protect whales from ship strikes).

- **Is the area operational and does it have a management plan that supports biodiversity conservation?**

YES: the area's stage of establishment is functionally equivalent to that of an "implemented" or "actively managed" MPA, and it has a management plan that either directly or indirectly supports biodiversity conservation.

NO: the area's stage of establishment is functionally equivalent to that of a "proposed" or "designated" MPA, and/or it does not have a management plan that supports biodiversity conservation.

- **Is the area adequately protected from extractive or destructive activities that have the potential to negatively impact biodiversity?**

YES: extractive or destructive activities in the MPA are having minimal total impact on biodiversity. To ensure non-MPA areas that qualify as 30x30 Conservation Areas provide a level of biodiversity protection that is functionally equivalent to that of a fully or highly protected MPA, the answer to this question should include assessment of the seven types of extractive or destructive activities that are identified in the MPA Guide as factors that may impact biodiversity:

- No **mining, mineral, oil, and/or gas prospecting** or exploitation is allowed.
- No **dredging or dumping** is occurring, unless it is for restoration purposes (e.g. to maintain natural access between a wetland and the ocean).
- If any **anchoring** is happening, it is low impact, small scale, and for short duration. In general, the majority of anchoring in California's coastal waters, e.g. anchoring associated with recreational boating, fishing, or diving, has minimal impact on biodiversity.
- If any **infrastructure** exists or is proposed within the MPA, it is low impact and small scale (e.g. fixed moorings or channel markers, but not renewable energy structures).
- If any **aquaculture** is allowed within the MPA, it is low impact (e.g. small-scale seaweed and shellfish aquaculture).
- Only **fishing** gear and fishing activities that do not significantly impact biodiversity are allowed.
- Generally, **non-extractive uses** that support equitable access (e.g. swimming, snorkeling, diving, kayaking, surfing, wildlife viewing) are considered to have minimal to low impact on biodiversity in California's coastal marine ecosystems.

NO: extractive or destructive activities in the MPA are having moderate to significant impact on biodiversity.

Individual 30x30 Conservation Areas should have their own management plans and use program- and location-specific criteria to evaluate biodiversity benefits and be adaptively managed as needed. Additionally, durable protection is an essential element of the definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area. However, if at any point, new activities incompatible with biodiversity conservation became allowable in a 30x30 Conservation Area, OPC would revisit and potentially revoke qualification of that area, and update the state's accounting of conserved acres accordingly, consistent with established process for terrestrial 30x30 Conservation Areas.

Next Steps:

Of the areas in the ProtectedSeas database, OPC has already made determinations regarding all fully and highly protected MPAs and all minimally protected MPAs, using MPA Guide assessments available on the Marine Protection Atlas. OPC has also determined that the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, a flagship example of a Tribal Stewardship Area in California's coastal waters, qualifies as a 30x30 Conservation Area. Finally, OPC has conducted an initial, high-level review of non-MPA areas, resulting in the qualification of the ocean portions of University of California Natural Reserves as 30x30 Conservation Areas. (Please refer to [Exhibit A](#) for more details.) These determinations are reflected in the 21.9% of coastal waters currently conserved, as detailed in the *Roadmap to Achieving 30x30* and this year's *Pathways to 30x30* Annual Progress Report.

Moving forward, OPC will now begin evaluating lightly protected MPAs that are not part of the state's MPA network and non-MPA areas using the criteria outlined above. This evaluation will be led by OPC staff in close collaboration with scientific experts from the Marine Protection Atlas team, supported by a grant to the Marine Conservation Institute via the Executive Director's delegated authority that is currently under development. Evaluation will also involve close consultation with state and federal agencies that manage various areas under consideration, as well as the potential for outreach to local California Native American tribes, scientists, conservation groups, and commercial and recreational fishing communities. Concurrently, OPC will work with tribes to develop a formal pathway for the state recognition and co-stewardship of Indigenous Marine Stewardship Areas (IMSAs), fund the development of IMSA management plans, and continue to support tribally-led monitoring and stewardship in furtherance of tribal stewardship goals. Results will be shared at OPC's second quarterly Council meeting in 2026 and included in the next annual *Pathways to 30x30* progress report.

This evaluation will drive significant progress on key strategies outlined in the *Roadmap* (Support tribally-led conservation; Explore the role of other coastal and marine designations in conserving biodiversity). However, evaluating California’s existing conservation landscape is only one step toward achieving the objectives of California’s 30x30 initiative. Importantly, the evaluation process will also result in the development of recommendations to strengthen protections, where necessary, to better improve biodiversity conservation and increase the total area of coastal waters conserved as we move closer to the 30x30 initiative’s target date.