



March 20th, 2026

California Ocean Protection Council
715 P St., 20th Floor, Sacramento, CA 95814
Submitted electronically to COPCpublic@resources.ca.gov

RE: 7. Recommendations for Social Science Research and Monitoring of the California Marine Protected Area Network

Dear Secretary Crowfoot and Honorable Councilmembers:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations dedicated to the protection of the ocean and coast, we write to express our deep gratitude for the Recommendations for Social Science Research and Monitoring of the California Marine Protected Area Network Report¹ (referred to as the Social Science Working Group Report in this letter). The primary takeaways, which emphasize “uplifting Tribal sovereignty and guardianship and elevating social sciences to an equal level to biophysical sciences in MPA monitoring and management” are critical to the mission of the Ocean Protection Council and to the success of California’s conservation targets. The undersigned organizations are grateful for and in resounding support of the recommended investments in social science research. We encourage OPC to approve the six recommendations contained in this report and institutionalize its findings by updating the MPA Monitoring Action Plan to incorporate social science priorities alongside ecological priorities.

California’s coasts and ocean are deeply interconnected with coastal communities, and, as mentioned in the Social Science Working Group Report, some of the core limitations of the

¹ Travis, K., Zulian, M., Harris, J.L., Allison, C., Ban, N., Canter, A., Christie, P., Crowe, G., Jackson, Coach, Kessler-Mata, K., King, P., Klain, S., Levine, A., Meyer, R., Pietri, D., Quintana, A., Selgrath, J., Shaffer, K., and Swearingen, T. (2026) [Recommendations for Social Science Research and Monitoring of the California Marine Protected Area Network](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/68ba0e8973ac54697b928407/t/69b4886eb8c4a572a2204bef/1773439096408/CA-MPA-SocialScienceReport-March2026.pdf). California Ocean Science Trust.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/68ba0e8973ac54697b928407/t/69b4886eb8c4a572a2204bef/1773439096408/CA-MPA-SocialScienceReport-March2026.pdf>

original Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) as listed in the Decadal Management Review (DMR) are gaps in integration of social science and tribal engagement. This funding disbursement recommendation specifically focuses on social science, which is critical to the success of the MPA Network by improving compliance and expanding the benefits of MPAs. The network is and should be adaptively managed using a framework that weighs the socioeconomic and cultural impact of MPAs to the full range of consumptive and non-consumptive users and communities who interact with MPAs, and it is critical that ongoing monitoring reflects these values and investments are made to continually understand these impacts.

By supporting social science research, OPC recognizes the key role information on human use of MPAs plays in shaping policy and management decisions that are durable, support the community, and make sense on the ground.

As mentioned in the Social Science Working Group Report in the Cornerstone 3 (Behavior and Usage) Guidance section, extensive monitoring data on human behavior in and around MPAs already exists and continues to be built on. One example of this is MPA Watch, a community science program that serves as the only long term monitoring statewide dataset for human activity on the coast. There is a critical opportunity to support and expand this work through complementary protocols like the MPA Watch Intercept Survey that can add value to this important long-term dataset. The MPA Watch Intercept Survey's second pilot project is underway and complements the MPA Watch core survey by allowing trained volunteers to integrate surveys with MPA Watch core surveys. MPA Watch surveys provide data on consumptive and non-consumptive uses taking place in MPAs. In the Intercept Survey, volunteers interview beach goers about their understanding of MPA regulations and barriers to access. We recommend future dedicated investments to fund the continuation of the MPA Watch core protocol, the new intercept survey, and analysis and reporting of this data, which are critical to expanding statewide data on behavior and usage in MPAs.

Additionally, the SeaSketch platform has been a critical tool for stakeholders and managers across the state to visualize long-term MPA monitoring data. This investment complements the social science investment recommendations as it gives an integrated MPA Network tool to the public that will increase understanding and explorations of the MPA Network including the long-term ecological monitoring data².

The release of the Social Science Working Group Report represents a critical element that was missing from the Marine Protected Area (MPA) Monitoring Action Plan. Social science research is not supplemental to ecological research, but an essential, interconnected partner. We

² OPC Staff Recommendation Item 7: March 23, 2026. "Action Item: Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Advance Adaptive Management of the Marine Protected Area Network" by Staci Lewis, Ph.D. <https://opc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Item-7-Adaptative-Management-of-the-Marine-Protected-Area-Net-work-508.pdf>

respectfully urge OPC to update the MPA Monitoring Action Plan to explicitly include social science as a core, integrated component alongside ecological monitoring. While ecological indicators remain essential for assessing MPA performance, social science provides critical insight into how MPAs are used, perceived, and experienced by communities; how benefits and burdens are distributed; and how management actions influence the use of these special areas.

For all the reasons included above, we enthusiastically support OPC’s staff recommendation for OPC to authorize the disbursement of “up to \$2,500,000 to advance management of California’s MPA Network through the following projects:

1. 7.1 Up to \$2,300,000 to the Regents of the University of California San Diego (UCSD)/California Sea Grant (CASG) to administer a Request for Proposals (RFP) for social science and other priority monitoring needs of the MPA Network
2. 7.2 Up to \$200,000 to the University of California Santa Barbara to expand SeaSketch California’s platform for visualizing long-term MPA monitoring data.”³

We again thank you for your support of social science research and for your recommendations in further investments in California’s MPA Network.

Respectfully,

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³ OPC Staff Recommendation Item 7: March 23, 2026. “Action Item: Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Advance Adaptive Management of the Marine Protected Area Network” by Staci Lewis, Ph.D. <https://opc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Item-7-Adaptative-Management-of-the-Marine-Protected-Area-Net-work-508.pdf>

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Re: Action Item 7. Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Advance Adaptive Management of the Marine Protected Area Network

Dear Secretary Crowfoot and Councilmembers:

On behalf of Fish On's community of anglers and spearfishers, we encourage OPC to approve funds to support adaptive management of California's Marine Protected Area Network. If approached responsibly, social science research will be incredibly important to better understand and meaningfully adapt California's MPA Network to better serve all communities. Future adaptive management should seek to mitigate inequities in the Network design, as well as inequities in governance for ocean management across the state.

7.1 Social Science Integration and RFP

The Recommendations for Social Science Research and Monitoring of the California Marine Protected Area Network Report (Social Science Report) addresses a critical gap in the MPA Monitoring Action Plan. We encourage OPC to update this Action Plan to explicitly include social science alongside ecological monitoring. Social science provides critical insight into how MPAs are used, perceived and experienced by communities; how benefits and burdens are distributed; and how management actions influence the use of these special areas.

However, we must note that past investments in social science and MPAs were inadequate and heavily biased toward the subset of ocean users who hold power and influence in governance. Future research must be more critical, thoughtful and inclusive. Through the lens of Fish On's extensive participation in these governance systems along with the significant time we spend recreating along the California coast—including participating in allowable activities within MPAs—we offer the following considerations for the approach outlined in the Social Science Report.

The human dimension studies which informed the MPA Decadal Management Review Report (DMR Report) raised significant concerns that the state viewed the social impacts of MPAs through the narrow lens of a subset of consumptive users, while overlooking the full range of communities impacted by, and benefiting from, MPAs. Moreover, these were presented throughout the DMR Report with no acknowledgement of the biases often prevalent in the

sampling methods used. The integrity of the information presented on the human dimensions of the MPA network, and the decision-making that results from these data, rely on a clear and stated understanding of where the knowledge gaps lie. Even if there were limited resources for more robust human dimension surveys at the time, presenting the findings of biased samplings as representative of an entire sector is misleading. We hope the capacities added through this new investment will lead to more robust studies, but these types of information gaps must be mitigated and acknowledged throughout future work.

The geographic location of MPAs are inherently exclusionary for many ocean-going communities and may limit input, particularly from communities of color, to human dimension studies. Los Angeles is a prime example, where communities across the state's largest urban area must navigate physical and hostile barriers to even experience an MPA.¹ The ideal of "minimizing the extent of fishing closures" in the MPA Network design has limited the extent of MPA experiences altogether for many communities. Access to our state's *ocean* parks must be enhanced for marginalized communities through other investment opportunities by the state—such as Outdoors for All and 30x30 initiatives—or findings from future social science research on MPAs will not be adequately representative.

A recent presentation of a stakeholder survey to the California Fish and Game Commission (FGC)² highlighted that existing governance structures do not foster equitable inclusion and participation. The survey showed the stakeholder demographics of the FGC as 86% male, 70% white, and 82% aged 45 or older. This is a stark contrast to California's broader demographics.³ Any outreach efforts seeking to inform new social science research must look beyond the state's typical governance and stakeholder structures. If this is not possible, continuing to present biased and limited sampling as representative of broad stakeholder views will undermine future opportunities for adaptive management to meaningfully achieve both California's equity and environmental justice commitments and the ecological goals of the Marine Life Management Act.

Noting these stakeholder biases, any conclusions drawn from future research on "adverse" or "negative" impacts of MPAs (ex. Cornerstone 5, page 20⁴) cannot be considered on their own. These should be presented within the context of the state's system of fishery management, particularly the significant cultural and procedural barriers to participation in this system and the consequent availability of resources for many marginalized communities. Shore-based and subsistence fishing communities, for example, are often not considered or included in decision-making and as a result, access to quality near-shore fisheries has declined over several generations.⁵ So, perceived negative impacts of MPAs to "fishing communities" broadly may overlook potential benefits to a large subset of that same community. Over time and if given the opportunity, MPAs may help mitigate this imbalance and allow marginalized groups to find

¹ <https://www.colorthewater.org/ctw-mpa-project>

² Staff Summary for February 11-12, 2026, Author: David Haug, David Thesell, and Melissa Miller-Henson

11A. Commission Executive Director's Report <https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=241317&inline>

³ California's Population, PPIC Fact Sheet (2026) <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/>

⁴ Travis, K., Zulian, et al. (2026) Recommendations for Social Science Research and Monitoring of the California Marine Protected Area Network. California Ocean Science Trust.

⁵ A Spatially Distinct History of the Development of California Groundfish Fisheries; <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4072628/>

safety and agency in decision-making processes.⁶ Considering direct adverse impacts independent of impacts from the state's fishery management system will undermine this opportunity for progress.

7.2 SeaSketch

The SeaSketch platform has been a helpful tool for stakeholders and managers across the state to visualize long-term MPA monitoring data. This investment complements the social science investment recommendations as it offers a tool for the public to understand and explore MPA monitoring data.

While we support OPC's staff recommendation for the disbursement of up to \$2,500,000 to advance management of California's MPA Network through both outlined projects, we hope the resulting research activities will include our recommendations. Thank you for your support and further investment in California's MPA Network.

Respectfully,



Anupa Asokan
Founder and Executive Director
Fish On

⁶ MPAs as a tool for environmental justice;
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2024.1478023/full>