UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

March 7, 2025

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SeaSketch helps stakeholders explore changes to MPAs

As part of its adaptive management cycle, California is considering proposed changes to its groundbreaking Network of marine protected areas (MPAs) through the California Fish and Game Commission's (CFGC) petition process. As it considers these proposed changes, stakeholders and marine resources managers are getting a valuable assist. SeaSketch California, an open-source marine spatial planning tool developed in the lab of UC Santa Barbara researcher Will McClintock, will provide a spatial tool for the public to interactively explore how the proposed changes modify the MPA Network.

"California was a pioneer in this method of engaging the public in designing MPAs using a participatory mapping platform," said McClintock, a scientist at UCSB's National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis. "California and UCSB have had a huge impact globally on how MPAs and other ocean zones are designed, and this California project is the latest reflection of that."

California's marine protected areas are a network of discrete marine or estuarine areas in state waters designed to protect or conserve marine life and habitats. They encompass diverse ecosystems from beaches to offshore and seafloor habitats. Enacted into policy by the California Legislature in 1999 via the Marine Life Protection Act, and fully implemented in 2012, the MPA Network aims to protect the diversity of marine life and the habitats on which they depend.

“(McClintock) has built an important platform,” said Staci Lewis, the MPA Program Manager at the California Ocean Protection Council (OPC), which plans a public demonstration of SeaSketch California on March 13 at the meeting of the CFGC’s Marine Resources Committee. “This is an academic-state-public partnership for a transparent, science-based participatory process.”

Those who were around for the initial establishment of the California MPAs a decade ago may find the platform familiar; it is based on MarineMap, an earlier iteration of SeaSketch that pioneered the use of real-time mapping and feedback to capture and comment on proposed MPAs.

SeaSketch California has been customized to provide the public with access to the data that will be used to evaluate a set of petitions submitted by California Native American Tribes and members of the public that could modify parts of the MPA Network. SeaSketch California will allow interested stakeholders to visualize these changes and how they align with critical scientific guidelines and habitat protection goals.

“SeaSketch California opens the door to accessibility and inclusivity,” said CDFW environmental scientist Kara Gonzales, “and it’s a way to get the public to the table and see the very same data that will inform the petition process.”

While California may be the first user (via MarineMap) of this open-source marine spatial planning tool, it is not the only one. SeaSketch has been deployed around the world to assist the governments in Fiji, Samoa, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Azores, Brazil and Bermuda engage in marine spatial planning, given their unique constraints, opportunities and priorities. McClintock has also been working in Argentina and Uruguay to familiarize stakeholders and agencies there with participatory planning processes that can be enabled by the platform.

However, California’s petition process provides a new opportunity for the open-source marine spatial planning tool and the public participation it enables.

“I work all over the world,” McClintock said, “and there’s no other place where stakeholders are as strongly opinionated as they are here.”

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