

# Maldives Roadmap to 30x30 – v13



Ministry of Climate Change,  
Environment and Energy



**UK International  
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MALDIVES  
**Resilient  
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## Executive Summary

The *Maldives 30x30 Roadmap* provides a comprehensive framework for achieving Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), which calls for the effective conservation and management of at least 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and marine areas by 2030. This document undertakes a review of Maldives current progress towards the elements under Target 3 of the GBF, providing recommendations of steps that could be taken as part of Maldives Roadmap to 30x30 in the future. The Roadmap serves as a supporting document to the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP 2025-2035).

The Maldives status as a large ocean state with 99% marine territory, and an area of incredibly rich biodiversity, is recognised in the existing 93 designated Protected and Conserved Areas (PCA), representing 0.07% of the Maldivian waters. These designations are supported by a number of different protection mechanisms, including UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, nationally designated Protected Areas and the globally leading role that Maldives is taking in exploring the use of Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (also known as OECMs).

The report explores each of the eight elements under Target 3 of the GBF in turn, providing information on the current context, gaps and recommendations for the future. The eight core elements address: spatial coverage, biodiversity prioritization, effective management, ecological representativity, connectivity, equitable governance, sustainable use, and respect for local community rights. Significant gaps identified by this report include offshore protection, ecological representativity, connectivity, and management effectiveness. Recommendations include expanding PCA coverage through new designations and OECMs, improving management plans and monitoring frameworks, integrating climate resilience, and adopting inclusive governance models that respect local knowledge and rights.

The Roadmap emphasises the need for sustainable financing, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement to ensure equitable governance and long-term success. It also underscores the role of PCAs in climate mitigation and adaptation, particularly through the protection of blue carbon ecosystems such as mangroves and seagrass beds.

Implementation will be led by the Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy in collaboration with national agencies, NGOs, and international partners, aiming to strengthen biodiversity conservation, support sustainable livelihoods, and contribute to global efforts to halt biodiversity loss by 2030.

## Acronyms

BBNJ	Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CCAs	Community Conserved Areas
EBSAs	Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ERA	Environmental Regulatory Authority
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
IBAs	Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas
IMMAs	Important Marine Mammal Areas
ISRA	Important Shark and Ray Areas
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KBAs	Key Biodiversity Areas
LMPAs	Large Marine Protected Areas
METT-4	Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool Version 4
MoCCEE	Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy
MFAOR	Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Ocean Resources
MMRI	Maldives Marine Research Institute
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MRR	Maldives Resilient Reefs
OCPP	Ocean Country Partnership Programme
OECSs	Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures
PA	Protected Area
PAME	Protected Area Management Effectiveness
PCA	Protected and Conserved Area

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Context

Maldives is a small island developing state located in the Indian Ocean, where 99% of the country is marine, covering approximately 900,000 km<sup>2</sup>. As a large ocean state, with an archipelagic chain of 26 natural atolls, and 1,192 tiny islands, Maldives has the 7<sup>th</sup> largest coral reef system globally and 5<sup>th</sup> most diverse coral reef system in the world. Maldives' marine and coastal ecosystems also comprise seagrass beds, mangrove forests, tidal flats, sandy beaches, shallow and deep lagoons, offshore pelagic areas and seamounts (Emerton *et al.*, 2009; MEE, 2015; Agardy *et al.*, 2017). Maldives provides habitats for a vast array of marine life and is home to 250 species of reef building hard corals, 1,090 species of fish and over 800 species of invertebrates. The atolls of the Maldives also support globally significant populations of whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*), manta ray (*Manta alfredi*), turtles particularly hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), and more than 20 species of whales and dolphins. Although land comprises only 1% of the country's area, terrestrial habitats in the Maldives are ecologically significant, providing critical stopover and nesting sites for a range of migratory bird species.

Maldives relies heavily on the marine environment for its economy and the livelihoods of its people. Tourism and fisheries contribute over half of the country's Gross Value Added (GVA) (World Bank, 2024); the tourism sector also contributes over 90% of government revenue through tourism related taxes (MCEE, 2019). Tourists are attracted to the Maldives for its pristine marine environment and opportunities to swim, snorkel and dive amongst vibrant healthy coral reefs. The fishing sector directly employs 6% of the total employed population, whilst the tourism sector employs 16% (World Bank, 2024). These sectors are particularly reliant on healthy and diverse marine ecosystems. In addition to economic value, the marine environment provides essential ecological services. Coral reefs and coastal ecosystems act as natural barriers, reducing storm surges, erosion and flooding, whilst mangroves and seagrass beds further stabilise shorelines, filter pollutants and support carbon sequestration, helping to mitigate climate change.

The marine ecosystems of the Maldives face mounting threats from both climate change and human activities. Climate-related pressures such as coral bleaching, ocean acidification, sea level rise, and mangrove die off are increasingly undermining the health and resilience of coastal habitats. In parallel, direct anthropogenic impacts including sand mining, channel cutting, land reclamation, and harbour development are often driven by infrastructure expansion and economic growth but can severely alter natural shorelines and disrupt ecological balance. Pollution from plastics, sewage, solid waste, chemicals, and airborne contaminants further degrades water quality and marine life. Tourism, while economically vital, can cause visual, acoustic, and physical disturbances to sensitive marine species if not carefully managed. The overexploitation of marine resources is a major concern, with unsustainable fishing practices among the key drivers of ecosystem wide degradation. Additionally, the introduction of invasive non-native species and outbreaks of crown of thorns starfish pose serious risks to coral reef integrity and biodiversity.

In response to growing threats to marine biodiversity and in pursuit of broader objectives such as preserving culturally significant sites, promoting sustainable tourism and fisheries, and maintaining ecosystem services that benefit local communities and the national economy, the Government of Maldives has designated a network of Protected Areas (PAs) and is in the process of recognising Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs). This network covers almost 661km<sup>2</sup> of the marine environment. Throughout this document PAs and OECMs are referred to under the umbrella term Protected and Conserved Areas (PCAs).

PCAs represent one important tool for safeguarding marine ecosystems and biodiversity and should be implemented alongside complimentary measures such as sustainable fisheries and coastal development management, pollution control and climate adaptation strategies.

## 1.2. About this document

The Maldives is currently developing its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), which will define the country's approach to implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). The GBF sets an ambitious global goal to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.

This Roadmap to 30x30 is designed as a supporting document to the NBSAP, providing detailed guidance on how Target 3 of the GBF<sup>1</sup>, focused on spatial conservation measures, will be advanced in the Maldives in the lead-up to 2030. The Roadmap examines each of the eight elements under Target 3, assessing the current context, identifying evidence and knowledge gaps, and outlining actionable recommendations to drive progress toward achieving 30x30. This commitment is grounded in scientific consensus, which suggests that protecting at least 30% of Earth's natural areas is the minimum required to halt biodiversity loss and maintain ecosystem services that humans rely on.

Target 3 of the GBF aims to ensure that at least 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine areas are effectively conserved and managed through protected areas and other conservation measures by 2030. It should be noted that as a large ocean state, the Maldives will be focusing on contributing to the global target for marine and coastal waters. It could be considered that all the islands across Maldives could be classified as coastal due to their size and nature, however, there are a small number of PCAs that could be considered as purely terrestrial sites. Due to their geographic extent, and less than 1% of Maldives being land, the contribution from the Maldives to the terrestrial target of GBF will be insignificant in percentage terms, but may be significant in terms of the conservation of specific species or critical habitats.

Importantly, the Roadmap prioritizes realistic and feasible actions within the timeframe of this plan. While broader systemic changes would further strengthen spatial protection measures, these are addressed in Section 4 of the report and are expected to extend+ beyond 2030. The Roadmap complements the Maldives National Framework for Management of Protected and Conserved Areas 2024 – 2029<sup>2</sup> and aligns with broader national and international efforts to conserve the marine environment. It includes a series of recommendations that will enable the Republic of Maldives to make a significant contribution to achieving Target 3 of the GBF.

Implementation of the Roadmap will be led by the Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy (MoCCEE). It is however recognised that a collaborative and inclusive effort is essential to success, and this Roadmap therefore provides a high-level policy framework guiding the contribution of the Government of Maldives, other partner organisations, non-governmental organisations and local communities towards achievement of the vision.

The document has been developed by the Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy (MoCCEE), with technical support from the UK's Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCPP) and contributions from the International Union for Conservation of Nature

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<sup>1</sup> Target 3 of Global Biodiversity Framework <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets/3>

<sup>2</sup> Maldives National Framework for the Management of Protected and Conserved Areas: <https://protectedareas.environment.gov.mv/storage/uploads/NAq7Xkoe/qhiiwdul.pdf>

(IUCN) and the Maldives Resilient Reefs (MRR), a registered Maldivian NGO affiliated with the UK-based marine conservation charity Blue Marine Foundation. Initial thoughts regarding content that should be included in a Roadmap to 30x30 were discussed with stakeholders at the first Maldives Protected and Conserved Areas Forum in January 2024. A summary of the elements discussed at this event is available in the [Forum Report](#). The Ministry and key partners continued refining the Roadmap over the following months, compiling a draft that was presented during the 30x30 Roadmap Focus Session in October 2025. The session brought together key members of the Maldives NBSAP Technical Committee, whose expertise and shared commitment to advancing national efforts under the GBF closely align with the Roadmap's objectives. Feedback received during the session informed subsequent revisions, and the Roadmap was validated at the second Maldives Protected and Conserved Areas Forum held in February 2026. This version of the document integrates feedback and insights received during the forum, while key reflections from the discussions are presented in the *Maldives Protected and Conserved Areas Forum Report 2026*.

### 1.3. Policy Drivers

#### 1.3.1. Global Biodiversity Framework

As a Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) since 1992, Maldives is committed to contributing to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) agreed by 196 countries at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention (COP15). The new GBF sets a global mission to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, to be delivered through 4 goals (2050) and 23 targets (2030).

This Roadmap is designed to guide the national process of contributing to Target 3:

*“Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories.”*

#### 1.3.2. Other International Commitments

The following international commitments by the Maldives relate specifically to area-based conservation measures in support of the 30x30 target. However, this is not an exhaustive list, and there are broader commitments in place that further contribute to the protection and effective management of PCAs:

- The **Global Ocean Alliance (GOA)**, established in 2019, is a 77-country alliance, led by the UK. The GOA champions ocean action, particularly within the CBD, including the 30by30 ocean target. Maldives has been a member of the GOA since 2020.
- The Commonwealth Blue Charter is an agreement by all 56 Commonwealth countries, including Maldives, to actively cooperate to solve ocean-related challenges and meet commitments for sustainable ocean action. **Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration** adopted by all 56 Commonwealth member countries is one of the largest marine

protection agreements, commits member nations to protecting the oceans from the threats of climate, pollution and overexploitation. Under 'Marine Protection and Restoration' of the declaration, global commitment to ensure and enable 30% of our marine and coastal areas by 2030 is reaffirmed.

- The **High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People (HAC for N&P)** is an intergovernmental group of 118 countries. The Coalition aims to deliver upon the global deal to protect 30% of the planet's land and 30% of the ocean by 2030, agreed upon at COP15. Maldives is a member of the HAC for N&P.
- Maldives has signed onto the **Leaders' Pledge for Nature**. Political leaders participating in the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020, representing 88 countries from all regions and the European Union, have committed to reversing biodiversity loss by 2030. By doing so, these leaders are sending a united signal to step up global ambition and encourage others to match their collective ambition for nature, climate, and people with the scale of the crisis at hand.
- In 2024, Maldives ratified the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (**BBNJ Agreement**). The main objective of the BBNJ Agreement is the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. This includes the implementation of area-based management tools, including MPAs.
- In 2019 the Maldives became a Party to the **Convention on Migratory Species (CMS)**. The CMS, also known as the Bonn Convention, is a global environmental treaty under the United Nations that aims to conserve migratory species and their habitats across national boundaries. By joining, the Maldives committed to international cooperation for the protection of species such as marine turtles, seabirds, sharks and cetaceans that traverse its waters.

### 1.3.3. National Policies

The constitutional, legal and policy basis supporting the 30x30 target are:

- Article 22 of the **Constitution of the Maldives** mandates the protection, preservation, and maintenance of the Maldivian natural environment and resources as a fundamental obligation of the State.
- **The Environment Protection and Preservation Act (Law No. 4/93)** serve as the primary umbrella law for environmental protection, which establishes fundamental principles for environmental impact assessment, protected area designation, protection of biodiversity and waste management.
- **Protected Areas Regulation (2018/R-78)** provides the framework for the designation and management of Protected Areas.
- **Protected Species Regulation (2021/R-25)** provides the framework for the conservation management of protected species. The Regulation lists protected species considered to be endangered including 5 species of marine turtle, whale shark, all ray species (class Batoidea) and 207 bird species.
- **The Maldives Red List** is a national list of threatened species that can be used as an aid to guide decision making in regard to species protection, management and

conservation. To date, 5 species of marine reptiles and 39 species of coral have been assessed: green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and 5 species of coral have been classified as endangered and hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and 23 species of coral have been classified as critically endangered.

- **Maldives Tourism Act (Act No. 2/1999)** governs the operation of the tourism industry, including the determination of zones and islands for the development of tourism. The Tourism Boundary Regulation Reg. No. 2012/R-12) determines the tourism boundaries of islands.
- **Regulation on the Protection and Conservation of Environment in the Tourism Industry (2006)** applies numerous prohibitions to activities that could impact protected species and protected areas. Additionally, the **Maldives Recreational Diving Regulation (2003)** governs diver training agencies and diving requirements, and other safety considerations.
- The Maldives **Green Fund** sources its revenue from the green tax that is levied on tourists. According to the fund statement (2019), monies may be dispersed for environmental protection and conservation, awareness and training, climate change mitigation, and environmental emergencies, as well as investments pertaining to the Green Fund.
- **Fisheries Act (14/2019)** provides the framework for sustainable fisheries management within Maldivian waters. Large-scale destructive fishing practices such as purse seine, gillnet, trawl net, explosives and chemicals and nets (except for bait fishing and personal consumption) are prohibited in the maritime zones of the Maldives.
- The **General Fisheries Regulation (Reg. No. 2020/R-75)** prohibits the harm, catch, take, use, killing, import, and export of marine species that are listed as protected, including corals, all parrotfish and Napoleon wrasse among 11 other species groups. Export prohibited species include all baitfish, lobster, and octopus among 10 species groups.
- **Fisheries Management Plans (FMP) and associated regulations** are in force for tuna, reef fish, grouper, billfish, sea cucumber and gulper shark fisheries, and FMPs have been developed for lobster, diamondback squid and marine aquarium fisheries. The grouper management regulation includes provisions to protect five grouper spawning aggregation sites.
- Maldives introduced a total ban on shark fishing in the Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in 2010, making it the only **national-level shark sanctuary** in the Indian Ocean. This decision also prohibited retaining of sharks in any fisheries in the entirety of Maldivian waters. In November 2025, gulper shark fishery was allowed under a management plan.
- **Regulation on the Conduct of Marine Research in the Maldives (No. 2020/R-100)** provides for the organisation, administration, and development of marine scientific research in the Maldives. Research undertaken by Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Ocean Resources (MFAOR) or in affiliation with MFAOR is exempted, as is research undertaken by mandate of a government agency.
- The jurisdictional boundaries administrative city council and island councils are determined under **The Decentralisation Act (Act No. 7/2010)**. This Act empowers local councils to manage marine resources responsibly within their jurisdictions, in

compliance with national laws. Councils have the authority to formulate, approve, and implement policies and regulations, manage community finances and resources, set fee rates, and collect fees for the services they provide.

- Under the **Maldives National Heritage Act (Act No. 12/2019)**, a Tentative Tangible Heritage List of 463 sites have been compiled.
- The **Maritime Navigation Act (Act No. 69/1978)** governs vessel movement in Maldivian waters, requiring Maldivian owned vessels to operate in a safe manner so as to not pose a threat or hazard to other activities in the marine environment.
- **The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) is prepared under the commitments to Article VI (a) of the CBD. NBSAP 2025-2035** is currently being revised to integrate the GBF targets to the national context, including targets that enable the Republic of Maldives to make a significant contribution to achieving Target 3 of the GBF
- The updated **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC)** of Maldives specifically includes an adaption action to strengthen national conservation programmes considering different categories of protection, local and community management, ecosystem-based approach to contribute to the conservation of marine and coastal biodiversity and increase their resilience to climate change impacts. PCAs can act as a coastal and marine Nature-based Solution (NbS) to both combat and adapt to climate change by protecting coastal and marine ecosystems that sequester carbon dioxide and by protecting and restoring ecosystems that act as buffers against climate change impacts.
- Maldives has no comprehensive legislation governing mining activities—either in the terrestrial or offshore environments. The historical coral mining activities were banned in 2010. The **Sandmining Act (Act No. 77/1978)** is dated and only covers mining activities on uninhabited islands.

## **2. Maldives' commitment to 30x30**

The Republic of Maldives is committed to contributing towards achievement of the global target to effectively conserve and manage at least 30% of coastal and marine areas through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of Protected Areas and OECMs by 2030. While the primary focus will be on marine and coastal ecosystems due to the country's limited landmass, the Maldives also intends to identify and include important terrestrial areas where they contribute significantly to national biodiversity and conservation goals.

The approach set out in this Roadmap recognises that area coverage on its own is not enough and that the effective management of these PCAs is also essential to ensure conservation outcomes as well as benefits to local communities. As such, the approach will involve:

- The identification and designation of new PCAs based on best available evidence including local ecological knowledge, respecting the rights of local communities
- The effective management of existing and new PCAs through the adoption of appropriate management plans, governance systems, resources, collaborative partnerships, long-term monitoring and enforcement.

### 3. Maldives Roadmap to 30x30

This Roadmap considers each of the elements of Target 3. It sets out the progress that the Maldives has made to date towards meeting the target element, outlines Maldives’ intentions to achieve the target element, and where appropriate, provides a summary of the steps that could be taken in the future to help further progress towards achieving the target element.

NBSAP Target to be added here:

#### 3.1. Element 1: Protection of at least 30 percent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of marine and coastal areas

##### 3.1.1. Context

**Global targets** aim to conserve and protect at least 30% of terrestrial and inland water areas, and at least 30% of marine and coastal areas by 2030 through a system of Protected Areas and OECMs. As a coastal nation, Maldives will prioritise marine and coastal ecosystems in its contribution to this target. However, terrestrial areas will also be considered, recognising their natural ecological connections and supporting role in sustaining healthy marine environments.

##### 3.1.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025

The PCA network in Maldives is comprised of a combination of legally designated national PAs and OECMs recognised by the MoCCEE. Table 1 depicts the comparison between Protected Areas (PAs) and OECMs.

Table 1 Definition of Protected Areas and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures

	Protected Areas (PAs)	Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs)
<b>Definition</b>	The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) defines Protected Areas (PAs) in <b>Article 2</b> of the Convention text as: “A geographically defined area, which is designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives”.	A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values. (CBD, 2018)
<b>Primary Objective</b>	Main primary objective is conservation	Conservation is achieved mainly as a by-product of other management

<b>Legal recognition</b>	Designated under the Environmental Protected and Preservation Act of Maldives (Law No. 4/93)	Not protected under the Environmental Protection and Preservation Act (4/93)
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A summary of each PCA type is provided below:

### **National Protected Areas**

National Protected Areas (PAs) are designated by the MoCCEE under the Environmental Protection and Preservation Act of Maldives (Law No. 4/93) to protect species and ecologically significant habitats from harmful anthropogenic activities. Activities may be controlled and managed in accordance with the objectives of the site. The first PAs were identified and designated in 1995 to protect nationally important dive sites. Since then, there have been continuous and progressive steps taken to expand the protected area network.

### **Other Effective Area Based Conservation Measures (OECMs)**

In 2022 the MoCCEE developed a guideline for recognising sites within areas leased for Tourism Operations that may qualify as OECMs. The criteria for an area to be recognised as an OECM are:

- Should not be protected under the Environmental Protection and Preservation Act (4/93)
- Are biodiversity rich and managed
- Activities undertaken in the area ensure protection and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems
- Ensure provision of ecosystem services (cultural, economic, social and other values)
- No activities in the area should negatively impact biodiversity and ecosystem services

Further information about the criteria is available in the 'Guideline for recognising areas as Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in areas leased for tourism operations<sup>3</sup>.

There are currently no OECMs officially recognised in the Maldives; however, there are 2 candidate OECMs and the process of refining the recognition process for a tourism based OECMs is being undertaken through an amendment to the guideline.

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<sup>3</sup> Guideline for recognition areas as Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) <https://www.environment.gov.mv/v2/wp-content/files/publications/20220428-pub-guideline-oecm-en.pdf>

While initial efforts to identify and recognise OECMs in the Maldives have focused on the tourism sector, future consideration will be given to other potential areas, including those linked to sustainable fisheries and community-conserved areas (CCAs). To ensure consistency and effectiveness, specific guidelines will need to be developed for each type of OECM, reflecting their unique governance structures, conservation values, and management contexts.

To date, there is a total of 93 national PCAs that cover an area of 661.78km<sup>2</sup> representing 0.07% of Maldivian waters (Appendix 1). The baseline percentage of PAs in the Maldives is detailed in **Error! Reference source not found.**

Table 2 Area and percentage of Protected and Conserved Areas in Maldives

Indicator	Protected Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Percentage (%)
<b>Total percentage of protected and conserved areas (Protected Areas + OECM) in the Maldivian Waters*</b>	661.7803	0.07
<b>PROTECTED AREAS</b>		
<b>Percentage of protected areas in the Maldivians waters</b>	661.7803	0.07
<b>Percentage of protected areas in terrestrial and inland waters</b>	7	2.97
<b>Percentage of marine protected areas in the archipelagic waters of the Maldives</b>	531	1.01
<b>Percentage of protected areas in the Territorial (41,490km<sup>2</sup>) and EEZ 859,000 km<sup>2</sup>) of the Maldives</b>	0	0.00

### 3.1.3. Gap Analysis

Maldives is a large ocean state with limited landmass, which has established a network of relatively small PAs, primarily located within the inner shores' archipelagic waters and more specifically within atoll boundaries. Although these areas are ecologically significant, their small size, specific features and fragmented nature limit their effectiveness in supporting species recovery and ecosystem resilience.

There is a significant gap in PCAs in the offshore territorial waters and EEZ of the Maldives. Expansion of PCAs in the Maldives would need to consider designation of some Large Marine Protected Areas (LMPAs) or OECMs in the offshore. Current guidance on OECMs is limited to resort areas, and there is a need to develop guidance that supports the recognition of diverse OECM types. This could include fisheries and community managed areas.

### 3.1.4. Recommendations

- Establish new PAs across Maldives. For example, new sites could be identified to cover at least one island, one mangrove/wetland, one coral reef, one seagrass bed, and one sandbank in each atoll, to ensure protection of key habitats.
- Develop a transparent ecological criterion, including keystone species, ecosystem uniqueness, and broader seascape considerations, particularly in offshore and pelagic environments, for designation of PCAs.
- Develop and promote the recognition of diverse OECMs with clear guidance on identification, management and governance, including fishery areas, community-managed areas, and offshore sites. Raise awareness of the processes available to apply for OECM recognition, with the aim of expanding PCA coverage and enhancing conservation outcomes.
- Designate LMPAs in the offshore territorial waters and EEZ of the Maldives to accelerate conservation targets and strengthen protection of offshore habitats, including ecologically important pelagic and deep-sea environments and species, while sustaining the traditional one-by-one tuna fisheries.
- Explore initial steps toward establishing both transboundary MPAs with neighbouring states and MPAs within areas beyond national jurisdiction, recognising these are long-term goals beyond 2030.

## 3.2. Element 2: Areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services

### 3.2.1. Context

30x30 global targets aim to prioritize the protection of areas that are particularly important for biodiversity including areas high in species richness or threatened species, threatened biomes and habitats, areas with particularly important habitats and areas that are important for the continued provision of ecosystem functions and services.

These can be defined as:

**Areas that include unique or vulnerable habitats and species:** Designation of PCAs should consider protection for species that are endangered, rare, endemic or that have geographically restricted ranges and their associated habitats, habitats that are isolated, have unique assemblages or have high species biodiversity as well as habitats and species that are more vulnerable to human impacts. It is also important to protect species that are vital for the functioning of the ecosystem (i.e. keystone species), for example top predators, grazers, important prey species or ecosystem engineers.

**Critical habitats:** When selecting sites, particular attention should be given to areas that are important for key life cycle stages and areas that are important for particular behaviours. For example, feeding / foraging or breeding grounds, as well as areas for resting / socialising and migration routes. Protection of important sites for reproduction (e.g. spawning or nesting

areas, nursery grounds, juvenile areas) as well as egg / larval sources will ensure that protected areas are self-sustaining.

**Areas that support climate change mitigation and adaptation:** Areas that support climate change mitigation and adaptation should be central to the design of new PCAs, including the protection and restoration of coastal “blue carbon” ecosystems such as mangroves, seagrasses and salt marshes, which sequester and store significant amounts of carbon. These ecosystems, along with coral reefs and other natural buffers, also help reduce climate-related impacts like flooding, storms and sea-level rise, while climate refugia—such as areas of cooler upwelling, strong currents or deeper waters—offer additional resilience. Although the carbon sequestration potential of blue and marine carbon habitats is widely recognised, blue carbon remains an emerging field, and its applicability within the Maldives is not yet fully understood. As a result, blue carbon protection is not currently prioritised within the national PCA network, and further research is recommended to clarify its role in future conservation strategies. Nonetheless, many of these habitats—including seagrass beds and mangrove ecosystems—are already incorporated into the existing network due to the broader ecological benefits they provide.

### **Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs)**

KBAs are sites that have global value for conservation, due to their outstanding ecological integrity, globally important ecosystems or significant populations of animals, fungi and plants (IUCN, 2016). The KBA concept builds on four decades of efforts to identify important sites for biodiversity, including Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas, Alliance for Zero Extinction sites, and KBAs identified through Hotspot ecosystem profiles.

To date, nearly 16,000 KBAs have been identified globally, and information on each of these is presented in the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas: [www.keybiodiversityareas.org](http://www.keybiodiversityareas.org).

### **Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs)**

Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) are areas of the ocean that have special importance in terms of their ecological and biological characteristics, which were identified following the scientific criteria adopted at COP-9 (Decision IX/20; see more at: <https://www.cbd.int/ebsa/>). Sites that meet the EBSA criteria may require enhanced conservation and management measures; this could be achieved through means including PCAs, MPAs, OECMs, marine spatial planning, and impact assessment.

### **Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs)**

ISRAs are “discrete, three-dimensional portions of habitat, important for one or more shark species, that are delineated and have the potential to be managed for conservation”. The identification of ISRAs is carried out through the application of scientifically based criteria. The primary objective of ISRAs is to inform policy interventions aimed at maintaining favourable conservation status for sharks within a given area, through appropriate management measures, which may include designation as MPAs.

### **Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs)**

IBAs are sites that are of significance for the international conservation of bird populations. These sites are identified based on a set of standardised, data driven criteria.

## Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs)

Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) are defined as “discrete portions of habitat, important to marine mammal species, that have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation”. IMMAs consist of areas that may merit place-based protection and/or monitoring. ‘Important’ in the context of the IMMA classification refers to any perceivable value, which extends to the marine mammals within the IMMA, to improve the conservation status of those species or populations.

### 3.2.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025

KBAs and EBSAs together with a range of other global and national tools are used by MoCCEE to help map areas that are important for biodiversity and ecosystem services across the Maldives and to inform decision making around PCA identification and designation.

#### Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs)

Haa Alifu Atoll has been recognised as a KBA for its non-breeding (coastal) populations of Lesser Noddy (*Anous tenuirostris*) (Key Biodiversity Areas Partnership., 2022). The KBA covers an area of 9.23km<sup>2</sup> and comprises of marine and terrestrial habitat<sup>4</sup>. This area is classified under the criteria D1A as a Type 2 marine IBA (Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas): for non-breeding (coastal) congregations. Reflecting its importance as a coastal site where seabirds congregate in significant numbers outside the breeding season.

There are four PAs covering 50km<sup>2</sup> in Haa Alif Atoll designated in 2019 covering, coral reefs, mangroves, wetlands and uninhabited islands important for foraging, roosting and nesting of birds. Gahlandhoo in Haa Alif Atoll is protected as a strict nature reserve as it is a critical habitat for Lesser Noddy (Ali *et al.*, 2023). However, these sites are located outside the KBA and may have more long-term conservation potential than the KBA which is an inhabited island.

Table 3 Percentage of Protected Areas in Key Biodiversity Areas

Indicator	Total KBA area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Protected within KBAs (km <sup>2</sup> )	Area Percentage (%)
Percentage of protected areas in KBAs	9.23	0	0
Percentage of OECMs in KBAs	0	0	0

#### Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs)

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<sup>4</sup> Key Biodiversity Areas at Haa Alifu Atoll  
<https://www.keybiodiversityareas.org/site/factsheet/14347>

There are two atolls in the Maldives recognized as EBSAs in 2012 by the CBD.

**Baa Atoll** was also designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2011. Baa Atoll has ecologically and biologically significant habitats for megafauna like manta rays, whale sharks and turtles. A marine taxa inventory of Baa Atoll noted 78 species of macrophytes, 173 species of coral, 350 species of fish, 115 species of hydrozoans, 182 species of other selected invertebrates, for a total of 998 species.

Hanifaru Bay, Huraa Faru and Dharavandhoo corner have significant aggregations of manta rays for cleaning, courtship and feeding accounting for 2,271 individual reef manta rays (Manta Trust, 2021).

There are 14 PAs in Baa Atoll covering 79.6km<sup>2</sup>, that protect reefs, mangroves, sandbanks and uninhabited islands.

**Rasdhoo Atoll** is among the few micro Atolls in Maldives and has a globally significant coral area and aggregations of hammerhead sharks (CBD, 2017b). Rasdhoo Atoll is formed in such a way that it is separate and unique from the other main atolls of the Maldives. In this regard, most significantly, it's Madivaru Sea is recorded to have the most hammerhead sharks throughout the year out of any dive spots in the entire Maldives in which this type of sharks are found. It is also home to manta rays, Napoleon wrasse and different types of turtles as well. The channel between Rasdhoo Island and Madivaru Island is known throughout the world as a famous diving site to spot hammerhead sharks. There are other significant dive sites in the atoll and there have been 204 individual reef manta ray sightings recorded in the Atoll (Manta Trust, 2022).

There is one protected area in the Rasdhoo Atoll covering 2.7km<sup>2</sup>.

Table 4 Percentage of Protected and Conserved Areas in Ecological or Biologically Significant Areas

Indicator	Total EBSA area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Protected Area within EBSA (km <sup>2</sup> )	Percentage (%)
Percentage of protected areas in EBSAs	1301.40	82.58	6.345
Percentage of OECMs in EBSA	0	0	0

### Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs)

Twenty-seven ISRAs as well as one candidate ISRA and nine Areas of Interest have been identified in Maldives. These include reproductive and feeding areas for reef manta ray (*Mobula alfredi*), areas for range-restricted species such as the cowtail stingray (*Pastinachus sephen*), aggregation sites for white tip reef sharks and resting areas for whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) (ISRA, n.d.).

### Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs)

Haa Alifu Atoll has been recognised as an IBA for its internationally significant non-breeding population of lesser noddy (*Anous tenuirostris*) (BirdLife International, 2024). This area consists of Haa Alif Filladhoo island covering 9km<sup>2</sup> under the IBA criteria A4i with 0% PAs (Birdlife International, 2025).

### **Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs)**

The Maldives Archipelago and adjacent oceanic waters are recognised as an IMMA with 23 cetacean species documented. Spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*) and pantropical spotted dolphins (*Stenella attenuata*), are the most frequently observed species, and are known to both feed and reproduce within the area. Blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) and humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) have also been observed at regular intervals, and may include visitors from both the Southern Hemisphere and the Arabian Sea. The Maldives IMMA contributes to broader global biodiversity targets.

### **3.2.3. Gap Analysis**

Whilst a number of areas of importance and sensitivity for biodiversity have been considered within the Maldives PCA network, there are a number of gaps outstanding.

- Currently there is an absence of a national review of the representation of areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services and climate refugia within PCAs across the Maldives. The submission of national data to the global reporting mechanisms for KBAs and IBAs is minimal. Significant habitats in the Maldives lack representation in these global databases which are used to measure the 30x30 indicator. Building understanding of the distribution of important habitats at a regional and national level and submission of this information to the global databases will be critical to inform Maldives progress towards 30x30.
- There is currently limited information around the role of blue carbon habitats in the PCA network in Maldives, and this would benefit from further research, to understand the role protecting these habitats will play in supporting climate change mitigation and adaptation. This could include “blue carbon” ecosystems (e.g. mangroves, salt marshes and seagrasses), areas that act as a climatic refugia (e.g. cold-water upwelling sites) and coastal ecosystems (e.g. mangroves and coral reefs) that buffer impacts of storms and sea level rise.
- Existing policies in Maldives do not currently consider endemic species, and these species should be considered as a priority for future PCAs.
- It should be noted that whilst some species are protected through different legislation in Maldives, there would be significant benefits in streamlining and harmonising these processes to avoid any gaps/ confusion which can impact on enforcement.
- Protection could be considered for tuna migration routes, although it is noted that regional cooperation should be considered for this.
- There is currently limited information on the economic value of different species and habitats to tourism. Further research would help highlight the importance of these and add additional rationale for their inclusion within PCAs.

### 3.2.4. Recommendations

- Undertake nationwide mapping of habitats and associated ecosystem services, to support understanding of services within existing PCAs, as well as informing decision making around future designations.
- Mapping of key habitats and associated ecosystem services to be built on available datasets and support strategic, evidence-led decision making, particularly in data-poor areas.
- Identify and map IBAs and KBAs in the Maldives for submission to ensure these areas are considered for long term conservation through spatial planning.
- Establish new protected areas or OECMs in sites identified as KBAs, key habitats in EBSAs, ISRAs, IBAs and IMMAs.
- Explore protection of migratory routes of keystone species nationally, as well as through regional cooperation.
- Establish measures to identify, compile and map endemic species and their habitats to be considered as a priority for future PCAs. Establish a data portal within Maldives Government to collaborate and share data on areas of importance for biodiversity in Maldives.
- Future developmental plans to consider minimal impact to EBSA, ISRA, IBAs, IMMA and KBAs.
- Gather information on economic value of different species/habitats within the Maldives.
- Identify and prioritise relatively pristine, undisturbed islands and explicit climate-resilient reef provisions in each atoll where natural coastal and ecosystem processes remain largely intact to support climate adaptation.
- Conduct research to understand the role of blue carbon habitats in the PCA network in Maldives.
- Strengthen integration of citizen science in identifying and mapping key critical habitats.

### 3.3. Element 3: Effectively Conserved and Managed

#### 3.3.1. Context

In order to meet international biodiversity targets, the extent of PCAs on its own is not sufficient: these areas need to be effectively managed in order to achieve sustained outcomes for biodiversity conservation. PCAs must be managed with the primary objective of achieving positive outcomes for biodiversity. Effective management and sustained positive outcomes for biodiversity conservation require clearly defined conservation objectives, the adoption of appropriate management measures and processes, governance systems, adequate and appropriate resourcing, effective mechanisms to promote compliance and enforcement, active stakeholder engagement, and consistent monitoring. It requires consideration of multiple aspects of PAs such as design and planning, inputs, management processes, outputs and biodiversity outcomes. PA management is not intended to be a static activity, instead regular monitoring, review and evaluation should feed back into decision making processes, as set out in Figure 1.



Figure 1: MPA implementation cycle

Effective management requires:

- A clear understanding of the area's ecological and social context.
- Consideration of the social, cultural and economic context of the site to ensure that certain groups, especially low-income and vulnerable groups of society, are not impacted disproportionately and that any benefits from the PCA are distributed in a fair and equitable way amongst the whole community.
- Strong governance and institutional frameworks.
- Effective and meaningful engagement with stakeholders and local communities that is equitable and inclusive of gender, age, ability and disadvantaged groups. This will ensure that all stakeholders are empowered to participate in planning, management and decision-making processes related to PCAs and ensure that their interests are fairly and fully considered.

- An up-to-date management plan that clearly sets out the overall goals and objectives of management and the strategies and actions needed to achieve these.
- Sufficient capacity including financial and human resources, adequate staff competency and appropriate access to equipment and infrastructure.
- Processes in place to ensure that activities and uses are compatible with the conservation aims and objectives and that threats to the site's values are mitigated.
- Powers to apply these restrictions through appropriate legislation or other means and the capacity and capability for enforcement.
- Monitoring and evaluation to ensure objectives (including conservation targets) are being met and to facilitate adaptive management.

### **Protected Area Management Effectiveness (PAME)**

Protected Area Management Effectiveness (PAME) Assessments are a globally used approach to evaluate how well PCAs are being managed, focusing on the extent to which management actions achieve their conservation goals and protect important natural and cultural values. PAME evaluations were undertaken for three different types of areas in Maldives in 2021 as a pilot using the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool version 4 (METT-4). These included one existing PA namely Hanifaru Area, and two areas that are potential OECMs. The assessments highlighted key successes and recommendations to help improve the management of each site. Evaluations using the METT-4 tool are ongoing, with an additional 12 PAs, including all sites in Addu and Fuvahmulah, and K.Huraa Mangrove and SAMPA assessed in 2025.

### **3.3.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025**

The Maldives National Framework for Management of Protected and Conserved Areas 2024-2029 provides the strategic direction for the effective management of the national network of PCAs. It sets out the overarching goals and principles for a well-managed network of PCAs and signposts to key legislation and documents for effective management. This will help to achieve a clear and consistent approach to management approaches across the national PCA network.

The Protected Areas Regulation (2018/R-78) requires all national protected areas to have an associated Management Plan and/or a Management Regulation in place.

A **Management Regulation** is needed where legally binding enforcement is required that may include but is not limited to:

1. Governance of a protected area
2. Zonation
3. Illegal activities
4. Regulated activities (details on visitation, permitting and licensing)

5. Fees
6. Enforcement related penalties and fines
7. Monitoring, Evaluation and Management Effectiveness

### **Management Plans**

A Management Plan shall be developed for all the areas to ensure effective management and long-term conservation. A Management Plan can help to address threats to specific species, habitats or ecosystems, and outline targeted actions to improve or maintain their status. Some of the key content of a Management Plan is detailed below:

1. Vision, Mission, Management Objectives
2. Zonation
3. Illegal activities
4. Regulated activities (details on visitation, permitting and licensing)
5. Baselines for PAME and IUCN Greenlist Readiness
6. Threats and strategies to reduce threats
7. Ecological / Conservation Values of the areas (Critical Habitats, species, ecological processes)
8. Detailed assessment of species (Indicator species, population size, reproduction, mortality, age structure, area of habitat, habitat quality, conservation status of key indicator species)
9. Connectivity: assessment of functional connectivity
10. Detailed assessment of habitats (key habitats, range, area of habitat, structure and function, ways to improve habitat conservation status)
11. Cultural and socio-economic values
12. Stakeholder analysis and community engagement plan ensuring good governance, transparency and accountability
13. Grievance mechanism
14. Current resource use
15. Carrying capacity and limits of acceptable change
16. Measures to manage access, resource use and visitation
17. Concept for visitor facilities and services (e.g., Nature Parks, Eco tourism, etc)
18. Financial plan
19. Governance

20. Needs assessment: finance, staff/human, capacity, skills, training, technical, equipment and technology needs
21. Needs mobilization and implementation plan: finance, staff/human, capacity, skills, training, technical, equipment and technology needs
22. Action Plan: with short, medium, and long-term goals, SMART targets, actions to improve management, baseline, indicators, responsible agency, partner agencies, deadlines.
23. Education and awareness
24. Finance plan with market assessment and willingness to pay
25. Climate change (impacts and plans for adaptive management)
26. Research, monitoring and evaluation

The difference between Management Regulation and Management Plan is detailed in Table 5.

Table 5 Table setting out differences between Management Regulations and Management Plans.

Management Regulation	Management Plan
<p>Developed only if legally binding requirement are part of management. Some of the legally binding requirements are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assigning governance to any other party other than Ministry/ERA</li> <li>• Regulated activities regarding visitation, permitting and licensing</li> <li>• Fees</li> <li>• Site specific penalties and fines</li> </ul>	<p>A Management Plan is sufficient for areas that do not have site specific legally binding requirements.</p>

### IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas

The IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas is a global program and voluntary standard that recognises and promotes PCAs achieving successful conservation outcomes through effective and equitable governance and management. Its Global Standard provides a framework for effective conservation, and in 2023 the Government of Maldives adopted the IUCN Green List Standard as a guide for PCA management and is committed to achieving Green List status for its PCAs. A shortlist of three areas has been identified to be considered for inclusion: Hanifaru Bay, Addu Nature Park, and Fuvahmulah Nature Park.

There are six PAs managed under management, namely Hanifaru, Olhugiri, Mendhoo, Eadhigali, Dhandimagu and South Ari Marine Protected Area (SAMPA). All information is provided via the Maldives PCA Website.

### Active on-site monitoring

Active on-site monitoring for compliance, along with regular ecological and social data collection with the presence of rangers is undertaken in three sites Hanifaru, Eadhigali and Dhandimagu area, and has recently been initiated in SAMPA.

Table 6 Percentage of PCAs with a Management Plan in place and IUCN Green Listed sites

Indicator	Total PCAs area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Area of PCAs that has fulfilled the indicator (km <sup>2</sup> )	Percentage (%)
Percentage of PCAs with a Management Plan	640.95	25.93	4.05
Percentage of PCAs with potential as Green Listed Sites	640.95	0.00	0.00

### Protected Area Management Effectiveness (PAME)

A summary of the number of PAME assessments completed in Maldives is presented in table 7.

Table 7 Information about the number of Protected Area Management Effectiveness (PAME) assessments in Maldives

Indicator	Total number of PCAs	Number of PCAs that has fulfilled the indicator	Percentage (%)
Number of PCAs with a PAME assessment submitted to the Global Database on Protected Area Management Effectiveness (GD-PAME)	93	4	4.3
Number of PCAs with improved score of PAME assessment	93	0	0

### Human resources

There has been an increase in the number of fulltime rangers or wardens employed in the Maldives to monitor and patrol the PCAs. The current numbers and locations where rangers and wardens are employed as fulltime staff are detailed in Table 8.

Table 8 Information about the location and number of rangers employed across PCAs

PCAs	Base Island	Number	Details
Sh. Farukolhu	Sh Funadhoo	2	Employed in 2025, through the GEF 7 CATENATE project
South Ari Marine Protected Area	A Dh Maamigili	3	Employed since 2023, through the government of Maldives, as staff of MoCCEE
Hanifaru	B. Eydhafushi	3	Employed since 2011, through the government of the Maldives, as staff of Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve
L. Gaadhoo Turtle Beach Area	L. Gan	2	One ranger employed since 2021, through an NGO, Olive Ridley Project, intern ranger hired in 2025
Eedhigalhi and Koathey Area (Addu Nature Park)	S. Hithadhoo	6	Employed since 2018, through the government of Maldives, currently as staff of Addu city council
Dhandimagi Kilhi Area (Fuvahmulah Nature Park)	Fuvahmulah	3	Employed since 2018, through the government of Maldives, currently as staff of Fuvahmulah city council
	R. Vandhoo	1	One ranger employed through a collaboration between WAMCO, Olive Ridley Project and MoCCEE
	L. Maavah	1	One ranger employed through an NGO, Olive Ridley Project
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>20 male, 1 female</b>

### Capacity building

Capacity building and human resource is essential to ensure effective management of PCAs. In 2025, through the GEF-funded project ENDhERI, the Maldives National University certified 17 graduates (15 male, 2 female), for completing the Basic Ranger Course. The graduates included 10 scholarship recipients of Laamu Atoll and 7 active rangers from PAs across the Maldives.

Table 98 Indicators contributing to the assessment of effective PCA management linked to number of rangers employed and training undertaken.

Indicator	Number
Number of rangers who has completed basic ranger course level	17
Number of fulltime rangers/wardens employed	21

Currently, only one PCA has a Research and Monitoring Plan in place. The National PCA Monitoring Framework, established in 2025, sets out a standardised process and template to aid PCA managers and associated scientists in developing Research and Monitoring Plans that support the effective monitoring of management actions outlined in PCA management plans. The Framework describes the attributes needed for an effective monitoring programme, and how to define monitoring objectives and activities for the various types of environmental and social monitoring. It provides guidance on how to identify research gaps and how these should be prioritised, how data should be managed and how the outcomes of research and monitoring programmes should be disseminated. Importantly, the Framework also provides guidance on how the outcomes of monitoring programmes should be used to support the evaluation of condition assessments and PCA management effectiveness evaluations to support adaptive management processes.

### 3.3.3. Gap Analysis

The lack of site-specific management plans in 87 PAs is a key challenge. Where management plans are in place, the limited availability of appropriate financial resources and human resource constrains the management authority’s ability to implement the plans. Sustainable financing<sup>5</sup> for effective conservation and management of PCAs is essential, particularly to the Maldives, where current PCAs rely on project-based donor funds. There is currently limited budget for staffing, monitoring and equipment and a lack of long-term reliable sustainable financing for PCA management.

Although there is an increase in the number of rangers and the introduction of a basic rangers’ course, these numbers are insufficient to ensure regular monitoring and surveillance of geographically dispersed PCAs. Moreover, there is a lack of career guidance about jobs in this field and current challenges to retaining and sustaining a skilled ranger workforce include inconsistencies in the pay framework.

Once management plans and/or regulations are developed, they are not intended to be static. Instead, it is recommended that they are reviewed on a regular basis, for example, every 5 or every 10 years. This will determine whether management actions are achieving the desired outcomes, addressing priority management needs, and meeting the objectives of the PCA to inform an adaptive management approach (see MPA implementation cycle shown in Figure 1). Very few PCAs have a formal monitoring and evaluation system in place linked to the

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<sup>5</sup> Sustainable financing is the ability to secure and effectively manage sufficient, stable, long-term and diversified financial resources to protect and enhance environmental ecosystems and support the communities dependent upon them. Key mechanisms include grant-based instruments such as conservation trust funds, market-based instruments such as user fees and biodiversity offsets, investment-based instruments such as blue bonds, and ecosystem-service-based instruments such as blue carbon credits and payments for ecosystem services.

objectives set out in the management plan. As a result, it is very challenging to determine whether or not the objectives of the PCA are being met. Furthermore, as there is only one PCA with a PAME assessment submitted to the Global Database on Protected Area Management Effectiveness (GD-PAME) in the WDPA, there is a need to increase PAME evaluations across sites in the Maldives. For areas with PAME evaluations completed, the results should be used to update Management Plans to improve the quality of management for existing PCAs (e.g. through adaptive management and information sharing, increasing the number of sites reporting 'sound Management') and to increase reporting of biodiversity outcomes in PCAs.

### **3.3.4. Recommendations**

- Develop SMART management plans, and Research and Monitoring Plans with progress indicators, reporting arrangements and compliance mechanisms for the remaining PCAs in Maldives.
- Undertake Protected Area Management Effectiveness (PAME) evaluations for existing PCAs and repeat PAME assessments at least once every 5 years. Ensure regular submission of completed PAME to the GD-PAME.
- Implement the recommendations in the IUCN Green List Feasibility Study to progress submission of the Hanifaru Bay, Addu Nature Park, and Fuvahmulah Nature Park.
- Identify appropriate sustainable financing mechanisms for the long-term sustainability of PCAs, and to ensure sufficient financing is available for management implementation (for example, conservation trust funds or ring-fenced user fees as well as blended finance approaches that combine public and private capital).
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies involved in PCA management, conduct a human resource gap analysis and build capacity of PCA managers, rangers, staff and Atoll/Island Councils (and other stakeholders) as well as staff within the MoCCEE and Environmental Regulatory Authority (ERA) to enable effective and equitable management of PCAs.
- Establish a clear process for local communities and PCA practitioners to effectively and meaningfully engage in PCA identification and management through implementation of the National PCA stakeholder engagement plan to jointly inform national conservation targets.
- Establish a national campaign to raise awareness of PCA values amongst the whole population in Maldives.
- Strengthen land-use planning at the national level to integrate biodiversity conservation.
- Establish National Protected Areas Service formalizing rangers as a uniform body with a defined role, associated training (and opportunities for career advancements to ensure it is an attractive and viable career option for young people
- Develop a national PCA Compliance and Enforcement Strategy and adopt an Intelligence-Led Risk-Based Enforcement approach to ensure that available resources are used as effectively as possible and to ensure fairness, efficiency and timely actions.

- Explore routes to ensure that future nature-based financing mechanisms and Green tax benefits the community and supports conservation management, for example, by earmarking some budget for the Maldives Nature Fund.
- Explore broader financing options, including blue economy pathways, sustainable fisheries incentives, and community-benefit financing models for long-term implementation.
- Explore options for tourism marketing to be used to promote and protect PCAs.
- Strengthen capacities and allocate resources, including human resources, for PCA research and monitoring.

### 3.4. Element 4: Ecologically Representative

#### 3.4.1. Context

PCAs should contain adequate samples of the full range of existing ecosystems, ecological processes and regions. To identify representative habitats, it can be helpful to classify habitats and species together into broad habitat categories based on a shared set of ecological requirements. It is assumed that a PCA network that protects these broad-scale habitats across their geographical range will also protect the associated species (IUCN-WCPA, 2008). When determining representativity, 3 factors should be considered:

- PCAs should contain different habitats to protect the full range of biodiversity present.
- PCAs should include a variety of different depths and should aim to capture the onshore-offshore or habitat-habitat movements of different species.
- PCAs should be large enough and appropriately located to protect and maintain the ecological processes that help to maintain biodiversity (e.g. food web interactions, nutrient flows etc). It can be assumed that PCAs that protect a wide range of habitats will also protect the ecological processes and integrity of the ecosystem.

The total area set aside for the protection of each habitat should be approximately related to its relative prevalence in the region (Roberts *et al.*, 2003).

It is acknowledged that the eco-region scale (referenced in the National Dossier from the Convention on Biological Diversity) is too large scale to be assessing representativity within the national context. As such, it may be more applicable to consider representativity in the context of the IUCN Global Ecosystem Typology to the Maldives set out below.

#### 3.4.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025

Ecological representativeness is assessed based on the PCA's coverage of broad-scale biogeographic units. Globally, ecoregions have been described for terrestrial areas (Dinerstein *et al.*, 2017), marine coastal and shelf ecosystems (to a depth of 200m; Spalding *et al.*, 2007) and surface pelagic waters (Spalding *et al.*, 2012).

Maldives contains:

- 1 terrestrial ecoregion: Maldives Lakshadeep Chago Archipelago tropical forest
- 1 marine ecoregion
- 1 pelagic province: Indo Pacific Warm Water

The coverage of protected areas in these biogeographic units are detailed in Table 9.

**Table 9 Coverage of PCAs in Maldives by Ecoregion**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Percentage covered by Maldives PCA network</b>
Coverage of PAs and OECMs in the terrestrial ecoregion: Maldives Lakshadeep Chago Archipelago tropical forest	1.4%.
Coverage of PAs and OECMs in the marine ecoregion	1.6%
Coverage of PAs and OECMs in the pelagic province: Indo Pacific Warm Water	0.0%

The IUCN Global Ecosystem Typology to the Maldives classified fifteen biomes and 33 ecosystem functional group in the Maldives as per the Global Ecosystem Typology (Toor *et al.*, 2022).

### **3.4.3. Gap Analysis**

There is opportunity for Maldives to increase protection in terrestrial and marine ecoregions and pelagic provinces that have lower levels of coverage by PCAs. Ecoregions which currently have no coverage by PCAs are key areas for action. Whilst certain habitats such as coral reefs and mangroves could be considered fairly well represented by the country’s PCA network, other habitats could be considered underrepresented. Furthermore, data around the extent of certain features is lacking, making it challenging to assess the area of feature currently protected. Features such as lagoons, channels, seagrass beds, sandbanks, and the offshore would benefit from wider representation.

### **3.4.4. Recommendations**

- Undertake a national review of types, area coverage and status and build a national dataset of broad habitat categories across Maldives as per IUCN Global Ecosystem Typology to the Maldives.
- Develop national Redlist of ecosystems to identify critical habitats for conservation and protection.
- Assess the representation of these habitat categories in existing PCAs and undertake a gap analysis to identify underrepresented habitats categories.

- increase protection in terrestrial and marine ecoregions and pelagic provinces that have lower levels of coverage by PCAs. Ecoregions which currently have no coverage by PCAs are key areas for action.
- Consider the use of existing data (such as data collected by Noo Raajje project) as baseline to support habitat mapping through inter-agency coordination and partnerships with NGOs.
- Undertake an assessment of ecological process assessments to strengthen representativeness and connectivity.

## 3.5. Element 5: Well-Connected

### 3.5.1. Context

In order for PCAs to be effective, they should be connected through corridors as well as integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean. This is an essential element of creating effective systems or networks of PCAs that can meet sustained in situ conservation outcomes and cope with stresses and disturbances, including from the impacts of climate change.

Marine habitats are ecologically connected through movements of species, nutrients and energy. This connectivity between habitats is one of the key principles of ecological coherence (OSPAR 2006, IUCN-WCPA, 2008). Linkages may include:

1. Connections of adjacent or continuous habitats such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves and seamount chains.
2. Connections through regular larval dispersal in the water column between and within PCAs
3. Regular settlement of larvae from one PCA to another that promotes population sustainability
4. Movements of mature marine life one site to another
5. Other ecosystem linkages such as the transfer of nutrients

Ecological connectivity between PCAs promotes resilience, helps to maintain fish stocks and diversity, and enhances community recovery from disturbance by ensuring mutual replenishment between PCAs (Brock *et al.*, 2012). Climate change is a particularly important factor to consider for connectivity as it can alter connectivity patterns by changing larval duration times, adult movement patterns and species distributions.

### 3.5.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025

Globally, ecological connectivity has been among the most infrequently applied criteria for PCA design as it is difficult to measure and knowledge specific to its application is still in the early stages of development (Lausche *et al.*, 2021, Gardner *et al.*, 2024). The case is no different for Maldives where limited resources and capacity coupled with the country's expansive marine area pose challenges in data collection requirements to inform connectivity.

Aspects of connectivity have been considered when designating existing PCAs, with many sites incorporating continuous habitats e.g., coral reef, seagrass and mangroves and known critical life history stages such as feeding and breeding areas for key species e.g., manta ray and whale shark. Local ecological knowledge has been used to provide information on ecological connectivity alongside existing data such as from fishers' knowledge, which was used to identify key grouper spawning aggregations which led to the designation of five grouper aggregation sites by the Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Ocean Resources (MFAOR). Fisheries management areas such as these grouper aggregation sites are not currently recognized in the PCA network, due to the discretionary nature of their regulatory frameworks. Management measures such as fishing prohibitions can be modified or lifted at any time. As a result, these areas do not meet protected area requirements for long-term

conservation. However, these sites have potential to be recognised as fisheries OECMs in the future, a recommendation captured under Element 1.

The PCA network is distributed along the entire length of the country, which supports a degree of connectivity, however PCAs are concentrated in inshore waters, and coverage across some areas (such as the central atolls) are sparser. In September 2024, Maldives became a signatory of the BBNJ Agreement, highlighting the country's commitment to protect not only the biodiversity within the territorial sea and EEZ of Maldives but also biological diversity in areas beyond its national jurisdiction. The Agreement sets up procedures to establish large-scale MPAs that will enhance international connectivity. This is particularly important for establishing protection for broad ranging species and the introduction of connectivity corridors.

Although there is limited knowledge on the connectivity of habitats and species across Maldives there are existing programmes that contribute to our understanding and have informed the designation of PCAs. The National Coral Reef Monitoring Programme run by the Maldives Marine Research Institute (MMRI) systematically monitors coral reefs across Maldives. Monitoring provides an insight into reef recovery after stressors like mass bleaching events (Amir, 2022). This data can help identify coral reef climate refugia to incorporate into PCA planning and support a climate-resilient coral network. Research undertaken by the Maldives Manta Conservation Programme and Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme have provided valuable data on manta ray and whale shark populations, movements and habitat use which have informed the designation of PCAs. Participatory mapping undertaken as part of the Noo Raajje project using the SeaSketch tool includes data layers such as the spatial location of manta ray aggregations and observations of other marine megafauna (sharks, turtles).

### 3.5.3 Gap Analysis

There is limited data available on the connectivity between habitats and species in the existing PCA network to understand whether the network is effectively supporting ecological connectivity and where the key gaps are. To incorporate connectivity into the network, estimates of larval dispersal distances, adult movement patterns, habitat linkages, and oceanographic conditions are required. However, much of this information is only learned over time and requires extensive resources. Therefore, consideration could focus on species where dispersal distances and specific paths between identified places are known e.g., critical areas of a life cycle.

Coral reefs are the dominant habitat type included in the current PCA network. To enhance connectivity, multiple ecosystems need to be protected across broad spatial scales and where possible, climate-driven shifts in species ranges should be considered (Lausche *et al.*, 2021). To enhance the protection of highly migratory species such as sharks, turtles, whales and dolphins, further research to supplement existing information outlined in section 3.2 is required on key life history patterns such as breeding, feeding and nursery areas, as well as migratory routes to inform the suitability of the current network and identify additional needs. The absence of adequate protection in habitats surrounding PCAs disrupts ecological corridors, thereby weakening the connectivity across the PCA network.

When little data is available, connectivity could be approximated by ensuring the PCA network is geographically well distributed. Based on the current network status this could include designation of larger PCAs in the offshore area that are spaced further apart than those in the inshore area and an increase in PCAs located in the central Atolls; for example, Thaa Atoll currently does not have any PAs. Planning could also be based on ocean currents, with a

greater number of PCAs located in upstream areas to support the protection of source populations that will populate downstream areas.

#### 3.5.4. Recommendations

- Assess the level of information currently available on species movements and habitat linkages across Maldives and develop a strategy to address information gaps. Prioritize key species and cost-effective methodologies to support the future designation of PCAs, including megafauna species corridors and other connectivity focused management.
- Establish a sustainable financing mechanism to support research and implementation through appropriate funding streams.
- Undertake regional review of Maldives and broadly identify Atolls/ areas that have fewer PCAs for consideration as areas that may benefit from new PAs in the future.
- Undertake re-zonation or inclusion of additional buffer zones of existing PAs to improve connectivity
- Conduct and collate research on oceanographic processes (currents, vertical movements, temperature variation, chemical changes, interaction of the ocean with the atmosphere) and land-based processes (nutrient flows, sedimentation, water cycle) and their effects on connectivity of target species and climate uncertainties and potential gaps in PCA coverage, through support of relevant academic and government institutions.
- Work with neighbouring countries to achieve protection for areas beyond national jurisdiction and enhance international connectivity.
- Undertake climate change modelling to predict shifts in species distribution or ecosystem functions due to climate change for consideration in PCA network design.

### 3.6. Element 6: Equitably Governed

#### 3.6.1. Context

A key element of the equitable governance of PCAs is ensuring that relevant actors are involved and able to fully participate in their establishment, management and governance and that the costs and benefits of establishing and managing such areas are shared fairly. It also includes effective participation in decision-making, transparent procedures, access to justice in conflicting situations, and the recognition of the rights and diversity of the people that will be affected by the establishment and management of PCAs.

For PCAs to be effective they must have **good governance** to influence human behaviour and thereby reduce impacts to the marine environment. It is important that the governance approach is inclusive and promotes a sense of stewardship through engaging local communities, with a focus on social, cultural and economic benefits as well as environmental ones. There are a number of different types of approaches to governance of PCAs. For example:

- Governance by government: Federal or national ministry/agency in charge; sub-national ministry/agency in charge; government-delegated management (e.g. to NGO).
- Shared governance: Collaborative management (various degrees of influence); joint management (pluralist management board; transboundary management (various levels across international borders).
- Private governance: By individual owner; by non-profit organisations (NGOs, universities, cooperatives); by for-profit organisations (individuals or corporate).
- Governance by indigenous peoples and local communities: Indigenous peoples' conserved areas and territories; community conserved areas – declared and run by local communities.

The most effective combination of these approaches will differ for each PCA and will depend on several associated factors, including political will, community involvement, financial status, legislation and the capacity for enforcement.

**Equity** is one element of good governance; it relates to how fairly a PCA is governed: who has a say in decisions, how decisions are taken, and how the costs and benefits are shared. In the context of PCAs, equity can be broken down into three dimensions: recognition, procedure and distribution:

1. Recognition: acknowledgement of and respect for rights and the diversity of identities, values, knowledge systems and institutions of rightsholders and stakeholders
2. Procedure: inclusiveness of rule- and decision-making
3. Distribution: costs and benefits resulting from the management of protected areas must be equitably shared among different actors

Equitable governance is a critical success factor for achieving the 30x30 target both in terms of conservation effectiveness and social and political legitimacy.

### 3.6.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025

Traditionally the focus in Maldives has been on Government-led PCAs, as per the existing laws and regulations in the Maldives. However, in recent years, the process of decentralisation has led to City, Atoll and local Councils having a greater role in PCA management. Similarly, decentralisation is likely to involve other stakeholders becoming involved with PCAs, such as resorts through the OECM process, but could also include other landowners such as the military.

Recent projects have sought to build capacity and understanding within Councils to support PA Management Plan development. These projects are a starting point, and much wider training and capacity building around all aspects of the PCA implementation cycle would be beneficial for local councils, NGOs and other stakeholders that will become involved in PCA management under different governance mechanisms.

Table 10 Status of governance for PCAs in Maldives

Indicator	Number of PCAs under the governance indicator	Percentage
Percentage of PCAs governed by the government (By federal or national ministry or agency)	81	87.10
Percentage of PCAs governed at decentralised level (by city/atoll/island council)	Addu (7 areas) Fuvahmulah (4 areas)	11.83
Percentage of PCAs under shared governance	Baa (1)	1.08
Percentage of PCAs under private governance	0	0
Percentage of PCAs under IPLC governance	0	0

The Environment Protected and Preservation Act (4/93) identifies the Environment Ministry as the lead agency for PA designation and management. The Protected Area Regulation identifies that ERA can handover the management of PA through an agreement with a concept and finance plan. The PAs of Addu and Fuvahmulah have their own Atoll level regulation where the City Councils are currently overseeing the PA administration. Moreover, the Olhugiri Area in Baa Atoll has shared governance where roles are assigned to the Baa Atoll Council and the Island Councils of Thulhaadhoo and Hithaadhoo for PA governance and management.

There are advisory councils developed for Addu and Fuvahmulah Biosphere Reserves and for the SAMPA management plan where decision making is shared by stakeholders from all resource uses including councils, NGOs and private sector.

A number of tools exist globally to assess equity in PAs and identify and address any gaps. For example, the site-level assessment of governance and equity (SAGE)<sup>6</sup> is a low-cost tool for stakeholders and rightsholders in PCAs to assess governance and equity. More recently, IUCN has developed a guidebook for assessing and improving social equity in marine conservation<sup>7</sup> which provides guidance and tools for different approaches; this aims to improve equity by promoting learning, raising awareness about key issues and providing insights for marine conservation initiative managers and other actors to drive action.

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<sup>6</sup> [Site-level assessment of governance and equity \(SAGE\) | International Institute for Environment and Development](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Guidebook for assessing and improving social equity in marine conservation](#)

Table 11 Number of PAs with social equity assessments

Indicator	Number of PCAs with social equity assessment
The number of sites that have assessed social equity.	0

### 3.6.3. Gap Analysis

The current system of governance of PCAs is led by the traditional centralised governance by the Ministry and ERA. The process of decentralisation is leading to Councils having a greater role in PCA management and there are opportunities to explore other governance types such as shared governance for PAs and private governance for OECMs around resort house reefs. PAME evaluations conducted across 3 sites in 2021-2022, identified that stakeholders felt they were not adequately involved in management decision-making processes and recommended the establishment of stakeholder committees or working groups as well as the identification of Environmental Champions on Atoll councils. No PCAs have yet conducted an assessment of social equity.

### 3.6.4. Recommendations

- Develop a guideline on PA Governance models of the Maldives with principles for identifying, implementing and monitoring different governance types, to support and strengthen governance models. Guidance to be developed with clarifications on decision-making authority, roles of local councils, responsibilities of NGOs and private sector partners, and pathways for shared or co-management.
- Assess equity of existing PCAs to establish baselines and identify relevant actions for improvement e.g. using the IUCN Green List Standard or the Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity (SAGE) tool
- Develop ability for communities to benefit from revenues generated by PCAs, for example, through user fees
- Strengthen shared management of PCAs with decentralised roles devolving more authority and resources to stakeholders at site level to enable strong local leadership
- Ensure that the governance approaches are inclusive and actively seek traditional knowledge and diverse views.
- Streamline consultation processes to minimise stakeholder fatigue
- Training for councils, NGOs and private sector to support the shared governance process
- Explore how locally managed areas can be classified as OECMs
- Introduction of Environmental Champion roles across the Atolls to support the dissemination of environmental information as a means to reach all members of society and provide the tools and knowledge for communities to input into decision making.

- Continue implementation of community level PCA awareness campaigns with a particular focus on innovative approaches to raise awareness and understanding of 30x30 and the biodiversity crisis and development of shorter audience-specific communication products.

### **3.7. Element 7: Sustainable Use Consistent with Conservation Objectives**

#### **3.7.1. Context**

Some types of PCAs allow for limited types of non-industrial, traditional cultural activities to occur within their boundaries. Examples could include hunting, fishing, gathering and tourism. Where these activities are permitted within PCAs, they should be sustainable and consistent with conservation objectives.

PCAs that promote economic, social and cultural improvements along with nature conservation can improve the long-term sustainability of human uses in the area. Consideration of whether use of a PCA is sustainable, is dependent on the features for which the site is designated, and its primary objectives. Clear objectives are critical to minimise conflicts; management plans should clearly set out information on features and objectives, as well as a review of the activities taking place within the site and should consider different approaches to determine which is the optimal one for achieving these outcomes in the local context.

PCA designation should recognise pre-existing rights, existing local management measures and traditional resource use practices and activities. Sustainable-use PAs that allow limited types of non-industrial, traditional and cultural activities to occur within their boundaries can be a valuable tool in protecting biodiversity and safeguarding the rights, food security, income and wellbeing of local communities, particularly in areas that have a high degree of resource-use dependency. This category of PA can reduce the social, cultural and economic impacts on local communities, can support small-scale fisheries sustainability and, as a result, often generates greater stakeholder support. Similarly, recognition of areas as OECMs can deliver biodiversity conservation outcomes in areas that are important for tourism or fisheries, supporting sustainable livelihoods and helping to transform sectoral practices.

Once designated, a range of different management tools can be used to ensure that human activities within the PCA are compatible with the site's objectives and are not disturbing or damaging the important habitats and species. The introduction of management measures should recognise pre-existing rights, existing local management measures and traditional resource use practices and activities and should be proportionate to the level of risk to the PCA's values.

#### **3.7.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025**

The Noo Raajje project completed a comprehensive ocean use survey across Maldives, representing above 25,000 people. The project also undertook a spatial and temporal characterisation of coastal development and infrastructure in the Maldives. These studies highlight the importance of the marine and coastal zone both for local communities and for economic activities in Maldives.

The Protected Area Regulation (2018/R-78) describes 7 different PA categories within Maldives based on management objectives Table 12. PAs can be zoned to allow one or more categories to manage the area. These include ‘Protected areas with sustainable use’, which are defined as protected areas that conserve ecosystems and habitats, together with associated cultural values and traditional natural resource management systems. A proportion of the area is under sustainable natural resource management and low-level non-industrial use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims of the area.

Table 12 Protected Area Categories of existing PCAs in Maldives

National Protected Area Regulation Category	Equivalent IUCN Category	Numbers	Percentage
<b>Category 1: Internationally recognised areas</b>	-	25	26.88%
<b>Category 2: Strict Nature Reserve</b>	Ia Strict Nature Reserve	3	3.23%
<b>Category 3: Wilderness Areas</b>	Ib Wilderness Area	1	1.08%
<b>Category 4: National Park</b>	II National Park		
<b>Category 5: Natural Monument</b>	III Natural Monument or feature		
<b>Category 6: Habitat/Species Managed Area</b>	IV Habitat/Species Management Area	14	15.05%
<b>Category 7: Protected Area with Sustainable Use</b>	VI Protected area with sustainable use of Natural Resources	31	33.33%
<b>Not Reported</b>		19	20.43%

The Government of Maldives has developed some guidelines for recognising areas leased for tourism operations as OECMs and to ensure that these resort areas are sustainably managed. This includes the criteria for OECMs, the process for recognising them and the requirement to conduct ecological surveys and develop management plans. There are currently 2 candidate OECMs: Hurawalhi and Six Senses Laamu. In addition, there are 3 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves: Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve (1440.20 km<sup>2</sup>), Fuvahmulah Biosphere Reserve (13.15 km<sup>2</sup>) and Addu Atoll Biosphere Reserve (158.24 km<sup>2</sup>). Biosphere reserves are described as ‘learning places for sustainable development’. They act as a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way.

The Protected Area Regulation sets out that activities conducted within the PAs may be controlled and managed in accordance with the protected area management plans. The Maldives National Framework for Management of PCAs summarises the different tools that are available to PCA managers to manage human activities. These include the Maldives Recreational Diving Regulation 2003 and voluntary codes of conduct for marine megafauna (sharks, rays and marine mammals) for managing tourism activities, a requirement for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for any proposed developmental activity that may cause significant impact on the environment (Regulation on the Preparation of Environmental Impact Assessment Report 2012) and the use of permits for activities such as research and filming as well as licences for tour guides and resource gatherers. The use of zoning within

larger PAs allows critical habitats and species to be protected in core zones whilst sustainable human activity can be permitted in the buffer zones.

### 3.7.3. Gap Analysis

The Protected Area Regulation has objectives to “ensure that the process of protected area declaration is consultative and transparent and enables the designation of different protected area categories”. However, there is no requirement to consider the social, cultural and economic context of the area when designating protected areas in Maldives and no guidance on selecting protected area categories. A study by Zubair *et al* (2011) found that the EIA system in Maldives is insufficient and made a number of recommendations for improvement. Since then, the EIA process has been revised and streamlined through the Regulation on the Preparation of Environmental Impact Assessment Report, 2012. There are however still gaps and advice has been provided to the ERA through the UK Government's Ocean County Partnership Programme (OCP)<sup>8</sup> on further improvements (for example consideration of climate change assessment, mitigation, monitoring and compensation, cumulative effects, MPAs, data collection and reporting and consultation).

### 3.7.4. Recommendations

- Strengthen the assessment of the social, cultural and economic context of the area considering the importance of the site for local communities and existing resource use patterns (including implications for sustainable financing options linked to user fees or tourism concessions) before designating new PCAs or implementing new management measures in existing PCAs.
- Develop guidance on choosing the most appropriate PA category taking pre-existing resource use and socio-economic status of the area into consideration.
- Provide training to PCA managers to help them determine the most appropriate tools to manage human activities within their PCA to make sure they do not undermine the site's conservation objectives whilst also ensuring a rights-respecting approach is adopted to enable local communities to continue established cultural practices and livelihood opportunities.
- Consider establishing new zonation plans where appropriate (e.g. no take zones to protect climate refugia for example, or to enable recovery of key habitats / species).
- Update the Regulation on the Preparation of Environmental Impact Assessment Report, 2012 to better consider impacts on PCAs including consideration of climate change impacts and cumulative effects

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<sup>8</sup> <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/maldives/>

## Element 8: The Rights of Indigenous People and Local Communities

### 3.8.1. Context

All activities that are carried out to achieve Target 3 must be done so recognising and respecting the rights of local communities. This includes, that rights, knowledge, including traditional knowledge associated with biodiversity, innovations, worldviews, values and practices of local communities are respected, and documented and preserved with their free, prior and informed consent, including through their full and effective participation in decision-making, in accordance with relevant national legislation and international instruments.

Strong participation from local communities, resource users and marginalised groups is a significant factor in the success of PCAs for achieving sustainable and inclusive conservation outcomes by ensuring that diverse perspectives and interests are considered in decision-making processes. Meaningful engagement in all phases of the process from identification of the site to development of a management plan and through to implementation, provides an opportunity for information exchange and increases accountability and collaboration among stakeholders. This can lead to the development of mutually acceptable management measures, helping to develop a sense of ownership and support amongst stakeholders, which ultimately may result in a higher level of compliance. On-going engagement provides PCA managers with a better understanding of any concerns stakeholders may have with proposed management measures enabling these to be addressed early in the process so that they can be factored into decision-making. Locally appropriate structures and processes should therefore be established to facilitate inclusion (considering the specific needs of the different stakeholders e.g. between gender, age, (dis)ability, culture, religion etc), incorporate traditional knowledge and empower local communities to participate in planning, management and decision-making processes related to PCAs.

### 3.8.2. Current status and baselines as of 2025

The Protected Area Regulation states that: “The following processes shall be followed in order to ensure a consultative process in designation of protected areas. 1. All relevant persons who may be affected through designation of the protected area shall be identified and consulted. 2. Community participation as a process of consultation”. There is however currently no formal guidance in place for stakeholder engagement and how PCA management authorities engage with their stakeholders is different for each site.

Extensive stakeholder engagement undertaken as part of the Noo Raajje project found that stakeholders believed that the condition of ocean resources in Maldives has declined over time. They identified the need for good ocean management including designating protected areas and establishing decentralised management with increased funding. The engagement demonstrated a range of different and often contrasting views on the most effective way to manage ocean resources highlighting the need to consider a diverse range of perspectives in the decision-making process.

OCPPI in partnership with the MoCCEE has developed best practice guidance for stakeholder engagement to ensure a consistent national approach across the network of PAs<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Best practice for stakeholder engagement:  
<https://protectedareas.environment.gov.mv/storage/uploads/e8qexbYP/l25inopg.pdf>

Consideration of Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) in PCAs is critical because these spaces are not only ecological assets but also social and cultural landscapes that affect diverse communities. Inclusive management ensures that conservation efforts do not inadvertently marginalise vulnerable groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, and socially excluded populations, who often rely on natural resources for their livelihoods. Ignoring GEDSI can lead to inequitable access to benefits, reinforce systemic discrimination, and undermine the legitimacy and sustainability of conservation initiatives. By integrating GEDSI principles, PCAs can promote fair participation, respect traditional knowledge, and strengthen resilience, ultimately achieving both biodiversity goals and social justice. The UK's OCPP collaborated with Maldives-based consultants to produce a Maldives GEDSI Context Review, which examines the current GEDSI landscape and identifies marginalized groups within the country. In addition, a GEDSI Handbook<sup>10</sup> has been developed to provide practical guidance and templates for integrating GEDSI principles into activities aimed at promoting inclusion.

### 3.8.3. Gap Analysis

The role and inclusion of local communities in PCAs in Maldives is an area that could and should be further explored and developed, to consider and identify opportunities to improve engagement. This should be done in consideration of all sectors of society, and could be framed through the lens of GEDSI – Gender, Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion and the IUCN Green List Standard or the Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity (SAGE) tool. A review of this kind could help to identify clear recommendations to help improve inclusion within all aspects of PCAs. Any delivery of recommendations should consider capacity and knowledge building, and awareness raising.

Examples of existing tools and methodologies include:

- Governance Assessment for Protected and Conserved Areas (Franks & Brooker, 2018),
- Social Assessment of Protected Areas (Franks *et al.*, 2018),
- Site-level assessment of governance and equity (IIED, 2020).
- IUCN guidebook for assessing and improving social equity in marine conservation <sup>11</sup>
- Maldives GEDSI Context review<sup>12</sup>
- Maldives GEDSI Handbook<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Handbook on Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI): A Practical Guide for Environmental Sector Stakeholders in Maldives. Available at: <https://www.cefas.co.uk/ocpp/ocpp-maldives/gesi-and-seah/handbook-on-gender-equality-disability-and-social-inclusion-gedsi-2025/>

<sup>11</sup> [Guidebook for assessing and improving social equity in marine conservation](#)

<sup>12</sup> Maldives GESI Status Review. Available at: <https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/983c9af2-4ecb-457c-8c72-04f0093a2338/ocpp-maldives-1-gesi-seah-status-review.pdf>

As well, a range of suggested actions are included in the 'Voluntary guidance on effective governance models for management of protected areas, including equity' (Annex II of COP Decision 14/8).

#### 3.8.4. Recommendations

- Develop a clear process for local communities to effectively and meaningfully engage in PCA identification, designation, management, monitoring and evaluation through development of a national PCA stakeholder communication and engagement plan.
- Apply intersectional stakeholder mapping and early engagement approaches to ensure participation of diverse sub-groups within local communities, including women, youth, elders, NGOs, schools, community leaders, persons with disabilities, fishers and other marginalised groups, drawing on tools such as social assessments and site-level governance and equity frameworks.
- Ensure GEDSI considerations are integrated into PCA planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation processes, including regular audits from a GEDSI perspective, ensuring that engagement includes marginalised groups, and that activities do not significantly impact any specific groups.
- Recognise locally used names for existing and potential PCAs to enhance clarity in documentation and use the native language (Dhivehi) in communications and discussions to foster greater community engagement and ownership in conservation efforts.
- Strengthen women's participation and leadership in PCA governance and management, including through gender-responsive engagement approaches, targeted capacity-building, and equitable access to PCA-related economic opportunities, supported by gender-disaggregated monitoring.
- Ensure PCA planning and engagement processes are inclusive of persons with disabilities and varying literacy levels, including through accessible consultation formats and materials, engagement with organisations of persons with disabilities, and consideration of inclusive design principles in PCA-related infrastructure where feasible.
- Provide training to PCA managers to support implementation of the plan at the site-level and enable them to build trust and partnerships with their stakeholders to ensure that there is ongoing consideration of cultural values, traditions, and activities in PCA management. This training should incorporate GEDSI principles and inclusive engagement practices.
- Continue implementation of community-level PCA awareness campaigns with a particular focus on innovative approaches to increase understanding of 30x30 and the biodiversity crisis, while improving information and knowledge sharing about PCAs with communities located adjacent to PCAs through tools such as public information boards that highlight the ecological significance of the area and outline permitted and restricted activities.
- Explore options to integrate modules about the marine environment and importance of conservation into school curriculum.

- Develop programme to pass local and traditional knowledge to younger generations to ensure knowledge is not lost.
- Prioritise the environmental field in universities and training, to ensure that job in the environmental sector (such as rangers) is seen more favourably.
- Progressively strengthen shared governance arrangements for PCAs by moving beyond consultation towards co-management models that formalise community roles, recognise traditional governance structures where relevant, and support fair and transparent benefit-sharing.
- Establish accessible grievance and feedback mechanisms for PCA-related concerns and apply equity indicators to monitor the distribution of benefits and impacts across social groups, supporting transparency, trust, and adaptive management.

## 4. 2030 and Beyond

During the consultation process for developing this Roadmap, several valuable suggestions were received that extend beyond the scope of this document. This Roadmap focuses specifically on the period 2026–2030 and outlines practical steps to strengthen the Maldives’ Protected and Conserved Area (PCA) network within this timeframe. While these actions are critical, it is acknowledged that broader systemic changes—such as improving governance structures, enhancing inter-agency coordination, and securing stronger political support for environmental protection—would significantly benefit long-term conservation outcomes.

Importantly, the PCA implementation cycle does not conclude in 2030. Achieving the 30x30 target marks the beginning of an ongoing process that will require continuous review, evaluation, and adaptation. Future discussions will need to assess progress, identify challenges, and set new ambitions for the post-2030 seascape. This will be particularly relevant as international negotiations under the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) agreement advance, and as Protected Areas in areas beyond national jurisdiction begin to be designated. These developments will shape the next phase of marine conservation and require the Maldives to remain engaged in global dialogue while adapting its strategies to emerging opportunities and responsibilities.

### 4.1. PCAs and Climate Change

Protected and Conserved Areas (PCAs) in the Maldives are a cornerstone of efforts to achieve the global 30x30 targets. While these areas are primarily established to safeguard biodiversity, their role in addressing climate change is increasingly recognised. PCAs contribute to climate mitigation by preserving ecosystems that provide essential services, such as carbon sequestration and coastal protection. For example, blue carbon habitats—including mangroves and seagrass beds—are highly effective at capturing and storing carbon, thereby reducing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Similarly, coral reefs, sandbanks, and lagoons act as natural barriers against storm surges and coastal erosion, enhancing resilience to extreme weather events that are becoming more frequent and severe due to climate change.

Climate change also poses significant threats to the health and functionality of PCAs. Rising sea temperatures, ocean acidification, and sea-level rise can degrade coral reefs, erode coastlines, and disrupt the ecological balance of marine and coastal habitats. These impacts not only undermine biodiversity but also diminish the climate-related benefits that PCAs provide. Therefore, it is critical that climate considerations are integrated into both the planning and management of PCAs. This includes assessing climate risks during the designation process, implementing adaptive management strategies, and monitoring ecosystem health to ensure long-term resilience.

Further research is needed to fully understand the role of Maldivian habitats in climate mitigation and adaptation. Quantifying the carbon sequestration potential of blue carbon ecosystems and evaluating the protective functions of coral reefs and other coastal features will inform evidence-based conservation strategies. By strengthening the link between biodiversity conservation and climate resilience, PCAs can serve as a dual solution—helping the Maldives meet international conservation commitments while safeguarding communities and ecosystems from the escalating impacts of climate change.

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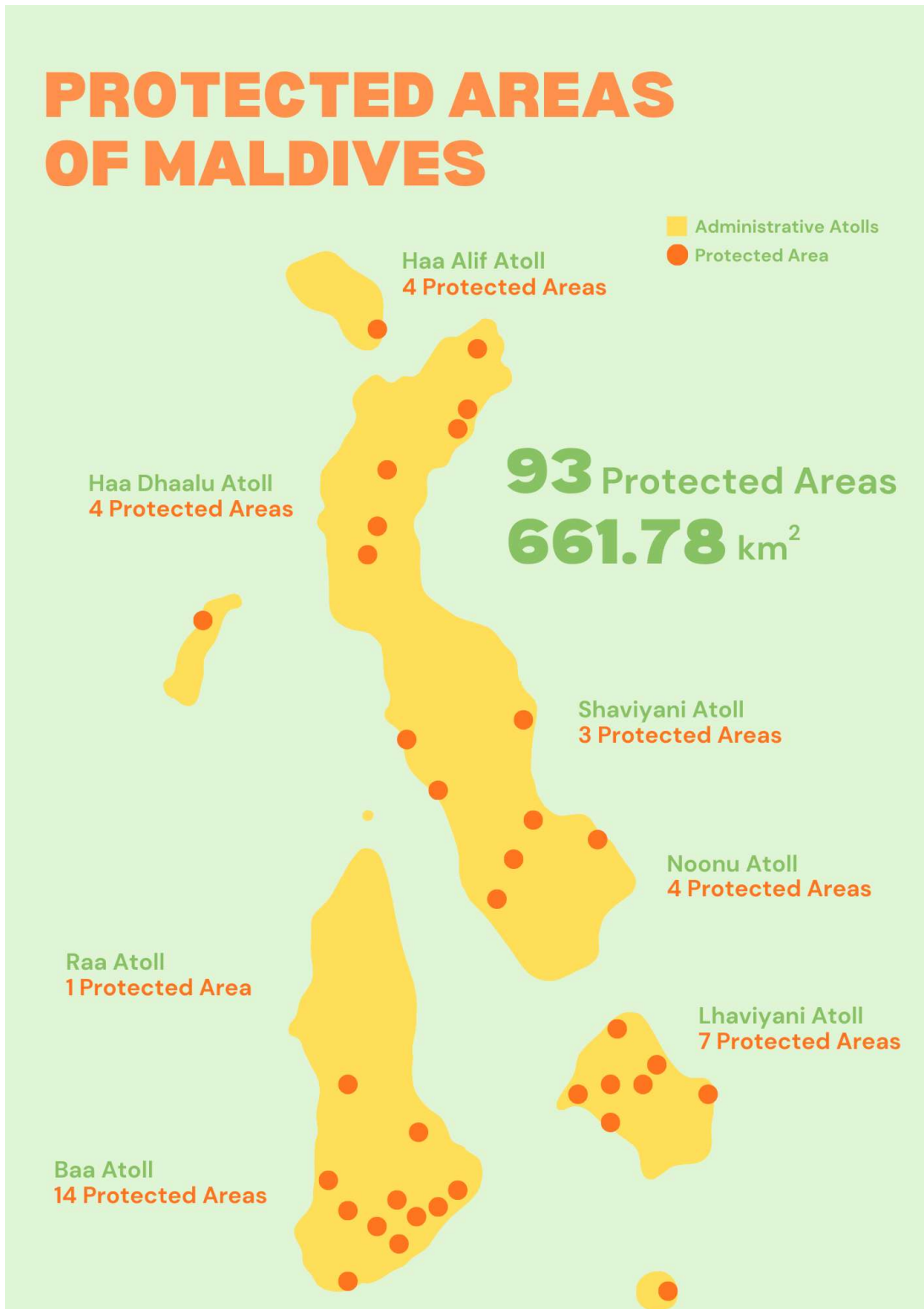
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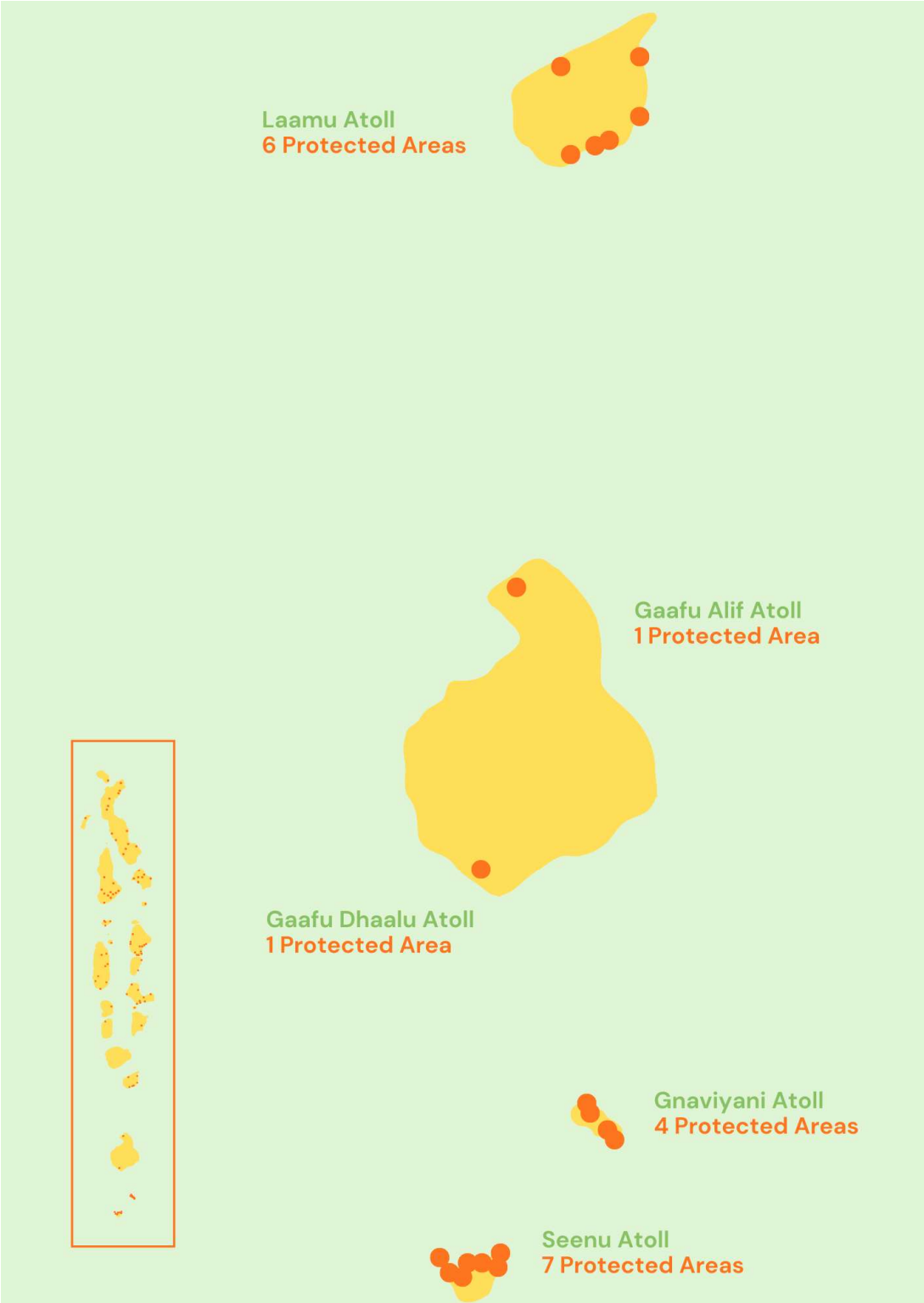
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Appendix 1 Existing Protected and Conserved Areas (PCAs) of the Maldives







Appendix 2 Infographic showing Maldives approach to 30x30

