

# Canada's inadequate marine conservation

In April, the Government of Canada announced a ban on industrial activities in all of its federal marine protected areas (MPAs) (1). This embargo includes mining, oil and gas activities, dumping, and bottom-trawling, which are deemed incompatible with the primary goal of MPAs: biodiversity conservation. Historically characterized by very low levels of protection (2), Canadian MPAs will now be better aligned with international guidelines (3). This decision is an important step toward more effective marine conservation. However, this change will only bring the expected benefits if MPAs remain the primary tool used by Canada to protect its marine biodiversity.

Canada has committed to protect at least 10% of its coastal and marine area by 2020 [Aichi Target 11 (4)]. MPAs are normally the primary tool favored to reach Aichi Target 11, but Canada's strategy has since 2018 instead relied largely on areas that are not governed and managed primarily for the long-term conservation of biodiversity (5). These new areas are designated internationally as "other effective area-based conservation measures" (OECMs); Canada calls them marine refuges (6). More than 60% of the coastal and marine area that Canada will report for Target 11 are OECMs (5) making the country an exception in the international community. Canada's OECMs will be regulated by laws pertaining to fishing, not by the stricter requirements that apply to MPAs. Because of the more lenient designation, industrial activities will be permitted in OECMs on a case-by-case basis (7).

In light of mounting scientific evidence of the negligible conservation benefits provided by weakly protected areas (8, 9), the recent designation of OECMs raises doubt about the overall effectiveness of Canada's marine conservation program. OECMs can in some contexts deliver important social and ecological benefits (10, 11), but designating fisheries management areas as OECMs should not be the principal foundation of a national marine conservation strategy.

With the Aichi targets expiring next year and the need to set post-2020 targets, we call on the Canadian government to strengthen and solidify its conservation strategy by transforming marine refuges into MPAs. We also call on the Convention on Biological Diversity to promote post-2020 targets that encompass enough area (quantity) with high integrity (quality) as a foundation for sustainable living in our rapidly changing world.

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