Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) Subcommittee
Meeting no: 12
Noo Raajje Program
Summary Minutes

Date: Wednesday, 15th September 2021
Time: 09:00 am – 09:50 am (Maldives Time)
Venue: (*Virtual)*
Attendees: 22 participants *(Refer annex for the virtual attendees list).*

Meeting Chaired by: Ilham Atho Mohamed, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology

(MSP Subcommittee meetings are co-chaired by the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency on a rotating basis).

Welcome Remarks & Meeting Minutes Recap

The Chair, Ilham Atho Mohamed, commenced the meeting by welcoming the members of the twelfth MSP Subcommittee, and providing a brief outline of the meeting agenda.

Noo Raajje Administrative Coordinator, Maeesha Mohamed, provided a quick overview of the last meeting minutes, which included the MSP goals ranking exercise and the vote results of the MSP Principles synthesis. She requested that members review and comment on the draft minutes, which were shared via a Google document link, by Monday, September 20th, 2021.

Presentation on Offshore Data and Science by Jason Flower, UCSB

(Presentation attached)

Jason Flower, Project Researcher at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), gave a presentation on offshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that covered the characteristics of the offshore environment, reasons to protect offshore environments, the benefits of offshore networks of MPAs, and examples of data available for the Maldives offshore waters. Some of the key highlights of the presentation are:

1. The ecological definition of the offshore areas are the areas deeper than approximately 80 meters. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) uses 80m to differentiate between nearshore and offshore areas because photosynthesizing corals do not tend to live beyond about 80m (therefore, it distinguishes between the nearshore coral reef areas from the environments in deeper waters). This includes both benthic and pelagic zones.

2. For the Maldives MSP process, offshore areas are defined as those beyond 12 nautical miles.

3. Includes range of species including those that travel large distances through the open ocean such as migratory birds and whales, as well as those that go from shallow water to deeper water.

4. It also includes the diverse habitats and benthic features that support different species, sensitive ecosystems such as seamounts, and hydrographic features. Based on the prediction from one of the global datasets, the Maldives has approximately 33 seamounts.

5. He addressed some of the key reasons to protect the offshore environments, highlighting some of the areas where human uses are increasing rapidly.

6. He then described some of the benefits of having offshore networks of MPAs rather than standalone MPAs.

7. He then provided details of some examples of data available for the Maldives' offshore waters, noting that the data was drawn from global datasets available online or through the authors of the papers.

8. Some of these examples include some of the key geomorphological features of the Maldives that could harbor different species or ecological groups, sediment thickness on the ocean floor which has potential for use in blue carbon, species distribution maps in the open ocean, octocoral habitat suitability which shows some of the important habitats that may be important for certain types of fisheries and tend to be areas of higher biodiversity, and offshore environmental data that shows the types of environmental data that are available which can be used to in the MSP and MPA development process.

He also clarified that the datasets shown in the presentation are modelled datasets (i.e. use some data about where a species is known to occur and then run a model to predict where it would occur across the ocean).

Questions and Discussions

The floor was then offered for members to ask questions and provide feedback. Following are the discussions that followed.

1. Shaha Hashim of the Maldives Resilient Reefs Project asked whether there are any datasets available for future modeling, such as future modeling of chlorophyll movement in the ocean, and so on.

Jason clarified that some of the datasets in the Bio-Oracle data archive (https://bio-oracle.org/) have been modelled under different climate change scenarios, and some of that data has previously been used in an MSP exercise in Bermuda to see if the proposed MPA areas captured a range of climate change scenarios.

Some of the aqua map species distribution datasets, such as the map shown in the presentation showing where blue whales and tuna species were projected to occur, are also available online.

2. Aisha Niyaz of AishaNiyaz Consulting requested clarification on the definition of "offshore" in the Maldives context.

Jason clarified that the ecological definition used in his presentation for the offshore environment is classifying areas deeper than 80 meters as offshore areas, and that using this definition of an 80-meter depth break between the offshore and nearshore, approximately 98 % of the Maldives EEZ that is deeper than 80 meters can be classified as offshore areas. However, the Maldives has decided to use the 12 nautical mile boundary as the separation between nearshore and offshore, probably making the offshore area less than 98 % of the Maldives EEZ.

3. Shaha also inquired as to when and by whom the decision regarding the 12 nautical miles offshore boundary was made and noted that the deep depths are important to be prioritized for protection.

Munshidha Ibrahim of Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture clarified that the Maldives maritime zones are determined in the Maritime Zones of Maldives Act No. 6/96.

Aisha emphasized that the 80 m definition is important to look at for offshore protection, especially given that 98 % of the Maldives EEZ is deeper than 80 m.

4. Ilham inquired whether these models provide information on the biological diversity of different areas under different management regimes, as well as management measures implemented by the Maldives, such as sustainable tuna fisheries and the protection of marine megafauna species.

Due to the general lack of data for offshore locations, Jason suggests it will be difficult to answer. The data presented are modelled data from available global datasets, and these datasets often make predictions using relatively small observations. Therefore, the most difficult challenge in protecting offshore environments is not knowing what is out there. He also noted that Data Sharing Agreements with agencies are not yet in place, so datasets from agencies located in the Maldives are not incorporated in any of these models, highlighting that those data would be very important for the MSP process and designating MPAs. He highlighted that some of the data can also be gathered as expert opinions via survey processes such as the Ocean Use Survey.

5. Shaha noted that, to her knowledge, there is no deep ocean exploitation in the Maldives and noted that it is important to protect the seabed from future exploitation even if they are nearshore.

Noo Raajje Site Manager, Fathimath Nistharan (Nisthu) responded that the nearshore data will be scrutinized as well, but for now, the offshore activities and data are being prioritized.

Wrap Up, Action Points & Closing Remarks

Ilham closed the meeting with brief remarks thanking Jason Flower for the very informative presentation, and members for their time and contributions.

<u>Annexes</u>:
1. Attendees' list
2. Presentation on the Offshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)
3. Final meeting minutes of the 11th MSP Subcommittee meeting

Noo Raajje Program Secretariat
22/09/2021