

Mongabay Series: [Conservation Potential, Oceans](#)

Not MPAs but OECMs: Can a new designation help conserve the ocean?

by Edward Carver on 6 November 2023



- *To meet the landmark commitment struck last year to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030, the world's nations will have to designate many new and large marine protected areas. But there's also a different, less familiar option for meeting that target: "other effective area-based conservation measures," or OECMs, areas that are not necessarily designed to protect biodiversity — they just happen to do so.*
- *Countries are now working to identify areas that meet the criteria and register them as OECMs, including in Africa where a recent webinar highlighted the promises and pitfalls of this relatively new conservation designation.*
- *Conservationists say OECMs could bring many positives, including the development, recognition or financing of de facto conservation areas led by local communities or Indigenous peoples.*
- *However, they also warn of the dangers of "bluewashing" or creating so-called paper OECMs that fail to deliver real conservation benefits in the rush to meet the 2030 deadline.*

In 2022, [the world's nations committed](#) to protecting 30% of their land and sea by 2030 (the so-called "30×30" initiative). At sea, this will require a massive buildup of marine protected areas (MPAs), and countries have been announcing

new ones regularly. But there's also a different, less familiar option for meeting the 30% target: "other effective area-based conservation measures" (OECMs).

OECMs, a relatively new term, differ from MPAs in that they are not necessarily *designed* to protect biodiversity — they just happen to do so. For example, a marine area where fishing activities are restricted and biodiversity benefits as a side effect could qualify as an OECM. So could a sacred or historic site that's closed to human activity.

Conservationists say OECMs could bring many positives, including the development or recognition of *de facto* conservation areas led by local communities or Indigenous peoples. They could, for example, recognize and build support for bottom-up management systems aimed at protecting small-scale fishers from competition with industrial fishing.

In the Global South, the conservation community is beginning to navigate the new OECM terrain. On Oct. 5, [GIZ](#), Germany's main development agency, and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA), a scientific body based in Tanzania, co-hosted a webinar on the future of OECMs in Africa.

"MPAs are frequently regarded as delusory and top-down," Arthur Tuda, WIOMSA's executive secretary, told Mongabay in an email. "OECMs would provide a wide range of options for balancing marine use while also providing conservation outcomes."

"They bring more inclusiveness to marine conservation as well as more realistic ways to balance development and conservation. The roles of various governance systems and actors in biodiversity conservation are recognized, promoted and made visible by OECMs," Tuda said.

However, Tuda and other experts have also expressed concern that the OECM system could be abused by countries or area managers seeking credit for meeting 30×30 targets.

"As with paper parks, there is the risk of paper OECMs created to beat 30×30," Tuda said.

Daniel Pauly, a fisheries scientist at the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, also warned of the rise of paper OECMs as the 2030 deadline nears.

“All kind of areas where the fisheries are managed will claim to be OECMs, that is clear,” Pauly told Mongabay. “Especially in six years, when the countries say, ‘Oh my gosh, we have to invent something that allows us to claim that we have 30%.’”



A fisherman pulls in a barracuda at sunset on the waters of the Casamance River, Senegal, in 2018. Local communities have had success reviving fish stocks and other wildlife by returning to traditional management methods. Image by Jennifer O’Mahony for Mongabay.

New opportunities

Some observers consider the OECM concept or name clunky: One participant at the International Marine Protected Areas Congress held in February in Vancouver, Canada, [referred](#) to them as “other extremely complicated measures,” and a GIZ staffer said OECM was “a terrible word” during the recent webinar.

Yet OECMs are expected to be a crucial part of 30×30 efforts. Currently, there are only 195 reported marine OECMs, covering 0.11% of the world's oceans, according to the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), which maintains an [OECM map](#). But that's because the concept is relatively new, and only six countries globally have designated marine OECMs. Reference to "other effective area-based conservation measures" was first made in the 2010 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) agreement, and OECMs were only [formally defined](#) in a 2018 CBD decision. To qualify as an OECM, an area must be managed and must deliver "sustained" and "effective" on-site conservation benefits.

Among the conservation and development opportunities experts say that marine OECMs present are "recognition and support of customary tenure rights," "recognition and inclusion of diverse forms of conservation" and "greater balance between achieving biodiversity benefits and human well-being," according to 2023 [study](#) that surveyed a panel of marine policymakers and practitioners.

Tuda of WIOMSA agreed, saying a key upside of OECMs in Africa is that they can recognize local communities. He and other experts have also suggested that areas such as [Locally Managed Marine Areas](#) (LMMAs) — spaces overseen by nearby communities, usually to promote a fishery — might be able to gain more access to conservation funding by being designated as OECMs.

"We could use the OECM label as a conduit to funnel financial resources toward [sites]," Daniel Marnewick, regional area-based conservation coordinator of the IUCN's Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, told Mongabay. He said the designation, as part of a well-known global system, would give confidence to donors and managers of financial instruments such as green bonds or biodiversity credits.

Africa has few marine OECMs, only 10 in Morocco and two in South Africa. But Marnewick said the wheels have begun to turn, with African countries now revising their [National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plans](#) to align with the framework signed in December in Montreal and building "30×30 roadmaps." He said he expects they'll be officially designating OECMs by 2026 or 2027. LMMAs in Madagascar, Mozambique, Kenya and Tanzania would be among sites under

consideration as OECMs, he said, and South Africa will have a national “OECM boot camp” in November.

Map from the World Database on Other Effective Area Based Conservation Measures (OECMs). Scroll to see designated OECMs. The Protected Planet initiative at the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre, which created the map, is used to track countries' progress toward achieving the commitment to protect 30% of their land and sea by 2030 (the so-called “30×30” initiative). OECMs can be counted toward the goal. Map courtesy of Protected Planet/ UNEP-WCMC.

Fears of ‘bluwashing’

The 30×30 target, set as part of a [framework](#) of the CBD treaty, is especially ambitious in the marine realm, given that current protection coverage of the world’s oceans is only about 8%. The rush to meet 2030 deadlines could pose dangers; even OECM proponents acknowledge that the designation system could be subject to 30×30 accounting abuse and risks being implemented in a top-down way that flouts the rights of Indigenous peoples or local communities.

“The primary challenge associated with OECMs is to avoid blue washing,” Estradivari, a marine researcher at Leibniz Centre for Tropical Marine Research in Germany who uses one name, said during the webinar. “OECMs could become a real labeling exercise with no net gain or even losses for biodiversity.”

In August, Andrew Clayton, a fisheries analyst at Pew, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, [sounded the alarm](#) about potentially questionable OECM designations, citing cases from the Global North. One example was an OECM off Newfoundland, Canada, that was opened to [exploratory oil drilling](#) in May. Policymakers said its borders will be changed if oil is found, raising questions about how meaningful and enduring OECM protections are.

Critics say Canada’s OECM approach should serve as a cautionary tale. It was one of the first countries to start recognizing OECMs, in the late 2010s, as a way to meet the CBD’s 2020 targets. This target-centric approach led to a [watering down of OECM standards](#), according to Christopher Lemieux, an environmental geographer at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Canada. “There is very little evidence that [OECM] guidelines provided by the international conservation

community are being used in their designation,” he told Mongabay by email. His view that Canada’s OECM approach is an empty labeling exercise is reflected in the title of a [2022 paper](#) he co-authored: “Running to stand still.”



Ali Garama, a fisherman on Kenya’s north coast, where fishing communities have been setting up no-fishing zones called *tengefus*, Swahili for “set aside.” Image by Anthony Langat for Mongabay.

If countries designate OECMs improperly, there are only limited measures of accountability. National authorities are responsible for verifying that their OECMs meet the criteria, Heather Bingham, head of the Protected Planet initiative at UNEP-WCMC that is used to track 30×30 progress, told Mongabay in an emailed statement.

“Governments are responsible for verifying the data they report to the databases,” she said. “Effectively, this means that data from governments is considered automatically verified, and there is no independent verification of this data.”

However, she said UNEP-WCMC does “all we can” to ensure transparency and accuracy and is developing methods of “additional, voluntary verification” to

satisfy requests from governments willing to be double-checked. Nonstate actors, such as Indigenous groups, can also designate OECMs, through a separate process.

How rigorous countries in Africa will be in their marine OECM designation processes remains to be seen, but the work is underway. Above all, any designations need to be done through “multi-stakeholder processes such as marine spatial planning,” and not as a “quick fix” for 30×30, Tuda said.

Banner image: A turtle over coral reefs off the coast of Australia. Image by Jordan Robins / [Ocean Image Bank](#).

Citations:

Maini, B., Blythe, J. L., Darling, E. S., & Gurney, G. G. (2023). Charting the value and limits of other effective conservation measures (OECMs) for marine conservation: A Delphi study. *Marine Policy*, 147, 105350. [doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2022.105350](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2022.105350)

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