

Marine Protected Areas: lacking coverage to meet commitments

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What is happening with Marine Protected Areas in Howe Sound?

The latest addition to a protected area in Howe Sound was the expansion of Halkett Bay Marine Park. An addition of 136 hectares or 1.36 square kilometres of marine foreshore was announced in May 2016. This addition protects a recently discovered rare glass sponge reef southeast of Gambier Island (Figure 1). The glass sponge reef is especially unique because it is adjacent to sponge garden habitat and the reef is only 30 metres deep, making it accessible to both scientists and recreational scuba divers. A mooring buoy to facilitate safe access for citizen science work is being considered. An update to the Park Management Plan will include limiting anchoring and bottom disturbance near areas of glass sponge reef and garden.

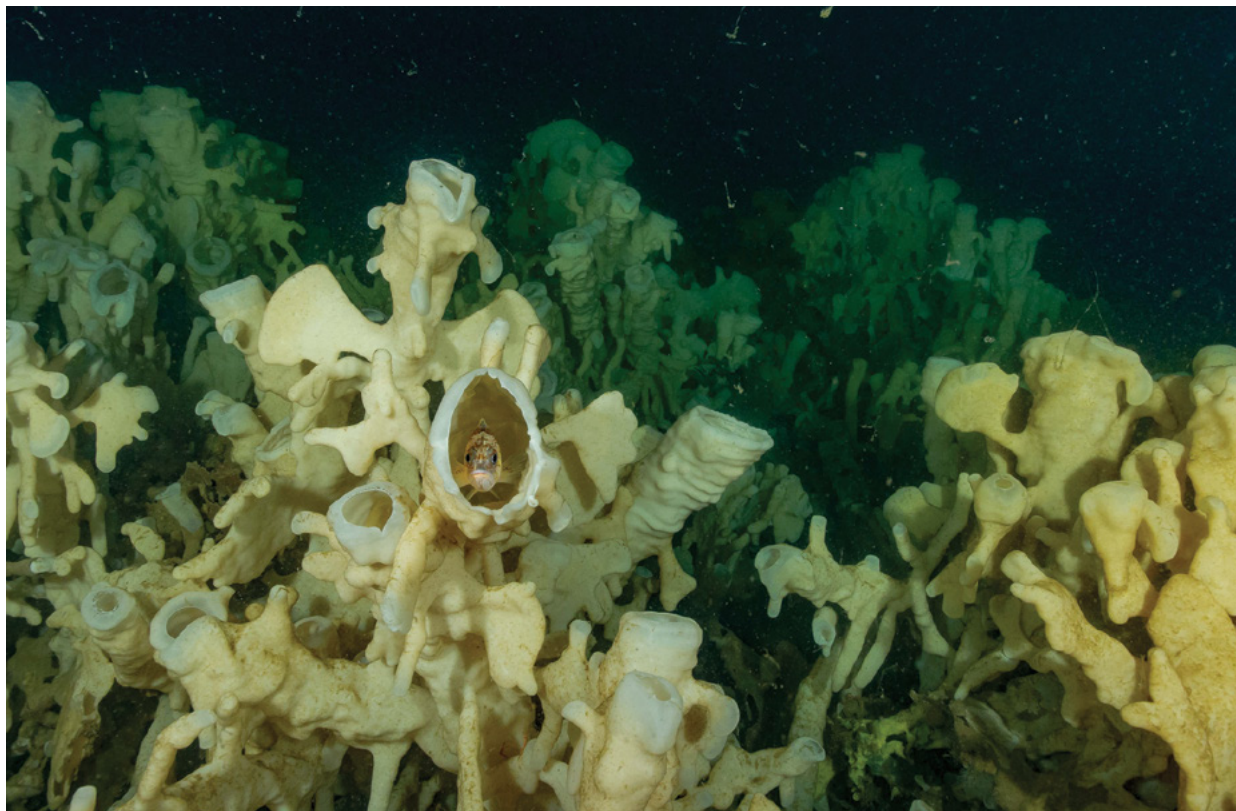


Figure 1. Newly protected glass sponge reef in Howe Sound. (Photo: Adam Taylor)

Including this new addition, just less than one percent of the marine area of Howe Sound is in a designated Provincial or Municipal Protected Area. There are no Federal Marine Protected Areas in Howe Sound. Howe Sound is lacking protection compared to Canada's international commitment to set aside 10 percent of our oceans as marine protected areas by 2020 (known as the Aichi Target under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity) or even the recent Liberal Government's promise to protect five percent by 2017.

A recent initiative led by B.C. Spaces for Nature and the Future of Howe Sound Society is exploring the possibility of achieving UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status for Howe Sound.¹ A biosphere reserve would include core areas where the ecosystems are strictly protected.

Why is it important?

Protection of habitats and species can be achieved through marine protected areas, fisheries closures, marine parks, wildlife refuges, or even a “critical habitat”² designation. Protection of this kind is just as important in the marine environment as it is on land. In B.C., 37 percent of the land base is under some kind of conservation designation.³ Marine protected areas (MPAs) and other designations can provide industry-free areas for recreation, impact-free areas for species, habitats, and natural processes to thrive, preserve eelgrass and estuaries, which are critical for storing carbon, and even enhance vegetation that shelters coastal communities from storm damage and rising sea levels. Protecting areas of the seascape provides some insurance against the unknown, resilience in the face of climate change, and can help to sustain the extractive activities that feed our communities and economies. Glass sponge reefs even represent a substantial silicon sink, based on estimates made for the three Strait of Georgia reefs.⁴ Silicon in the ocean is important for primary productivity as some plankton need silicon to build their tiny skeletons.

A marine protected area is a general term referring to an area of ocean in which human activity is restricted to conserve the marine environment and the wildlife that lives there. Under this umbrella term there are many different types of protected areas, including marine parks, marine reserves and special areas of conservation, each with its own level of protection. Other types of designations also provide some protection to species and habitats. Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCAs) are not MPAs but have been closed to a suite of fisheries since 2007 to facilitate the recovery of rockfish populations in B.C., although rockfish can still be caught as accidental bycatch in these areas by gear that is permitted, such as prawn traps. In 2015, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) implemented another type of fishing closure, Glass Sponge Reef Fishing Closures, to protect sponge reef habitat.⁵ The main differences between fishing closures and MPAs are that fishing closures are not permanently designated through legislation and can be lifted at any time by DFO, and the closures do not have individual management plans.⁶

What is the connection to First Nations?



Photo: Bob Turner

Squamish Nation partners with the Province to manage the Skwelwil'em Squamish Estuary Wildlife Management Area. "Porteau Cove Provincial Camp-ground [and Park] is an area known by the Squamish Nation as Xwaxw'chayay, referring to the sturgeon traditionally fished there. Historically, it was a place rich in marine and other wildlife and one of the oldest archaeological sites on the Northwest Coast is located here, dating back 9,800 years."⁷

What is the current state of protection in Howe Sound?

Currently Howe Sound has six marine protected areas covering just one percent of the ocean area (some of which are more accurately recreation areas), 11 RCAs covering 12 percent, and two Glass Sponge Reef Closures covering one percent (Figures 2, 3). Eighty-six percent of Howe Sound is without any special designation which protects the marine environment. Five areas designated by the provincial government include Apodaca Park, Halkett Bay Marine Park, Plumper Cove Marine Park, Porteau Cove Park, and Skwel-wil'em Squamish Estuary Wildlife Management Area.

These are considered to be marine protected areas by the province, even though the first three have no fishing closures in place.⁸ Fishing regulation is federal jurisdiction, so in order for provincial or municipal protected areas to implement fishing closures they must work with DFO. Whytecliff Park and Porteau Cove have annually renewable fishing closures implemented federally. Whytecliff Park, designated by the Municipality of West Vancouver, has the distinction of being the only marine protected area in British Columbia that prohibits commercial fishing in 100

TYPES OF MARINE PROTECTION IN HOWE SOUND

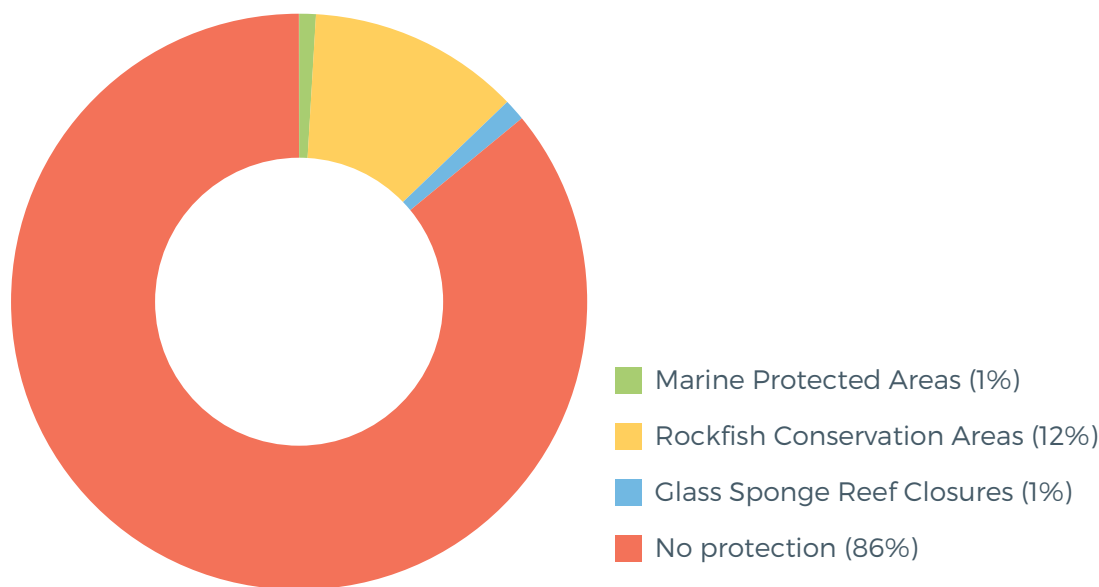


Figure 2. Types of marine protection in the Howe Sound marine area which totals 32,640 hectares.

percent of its marine area,^{9,10} but that area is just 22 hectares, and the closures must be renewed annually by DFO. Enforcement of fishing regulations, whether it is in a protected area or a closed area is also a federal responsibility and capacity is limited.

Only the Skwelwil'em Squamish Estuary Wildlife Management Area was originally designated with conservation or protection (i.e., restoration and maintenance of habitat) as the sole and primary purpose (Table 1). The Halkett expansion was created to protect glass sponge reefs and fishing closures to implement this protection remain a topic of discussion.

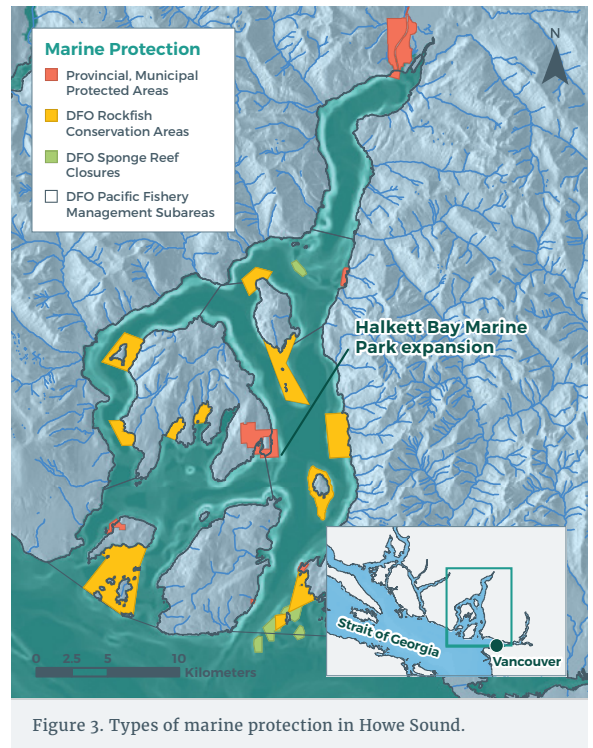


Figure 3. Types of marine protection in Howe Sound.

TABLE 1. PROVINCIAL AND MUNICIPAL MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN HOWE SOUND

MARINE PROTECTED AREA	ESTABLISHED	PRIMARY PURPOSE ¹¹	MARINE AREA (HECTARES)
Apodaca Park	1954	Preservation, recreation	4
Halkett Bay Marine Park	1988	Recreation; Park expansion to protect glass sponge reef	154
Plumper Cove Marine Park	1960	Recreation	33
Porteau Cove Park	1981	Conservation, recreation	52
Skwelwil'em Squamish Estuary Wildlife Management Area	2007	Maintenance, restoration of habitat	40
Whytecliff park	1909	Recreation	22

What is being done?

In Howe Sound, Marine Life Sanctuaries Society (MLSS) has long been pursuing various approaches to securing marine conservation. The Society was instrumental in the Halkett Bay Provincial Park Expansion and reports that multiparty discussions with user groups, conservation groups, BC Parks and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) regarding fishing closures to protect the glass sponge reef will be held.¹² On another front, at the request of MLSS, Bowen Island Municipal Council (BIMC) passed three resolutions in October 2015¹³ related to the Dorman Point sponge reef, located within Bowen Island Municipality boundaries, resulting in these actions:

- A letter from BIMC was sent to DFO requesting that stakeholder consultation be re-opened and that recently announced fishing closures on glass sponge reefs be expanded to all known reefs in Howe Sound including Dorman Point.
- BIMC has acknowledged the boundaries of Dorman Point sponge reef and municipal staff is considering the reef when any development permit application overlaps the area. The plan is to amend Bylaws to make this mandatory.
- BC Hydro has been made aware of Dorman Point reef with a detailed site map provided by MLSS so that they can avoid it when laying cable to Bowen Island.

The current federal government has renewed the commitment to protect five percent of the coastal and marine environment by 2017, and 10 percent by 2020.¹⁴ Individual advocacy organizations are working to encourage the government to meet this commitment. The Government of Canada, Province of B.C. and 17 First Nations are working together to develop a marine protected area network in the Northern Shelf Bioregion (NSB), which extends from the top of Vancouver Island to the Canada — Alaska border,¹⁵ but that leaves out the South Coast including Howe Sound.

What can you do?



Individual and Organization Actions:

- Participate in Marine Life Sanctuaries Society of B.C.'s "Voluntary No-Take initiative"; <https://mlssbc.com/programs/voluntary-no-take-initiative/> and pledge to not harvest marine life from these areas regardless of current fishing regulations.
- Become a steward of Howe Sound and report illegal fishing activities in MPAs and RCAs to DFO.
- Educate yourself and others on where the marine protected area boundaries are, and ensure you are adhering to all regulations within them.



Government Actions and Policy:

- Increase public education and awareness of marine protected areas, their boundaries, and regulations.
- Increase capacity to ensure better monitoring and enforcement in RCAs and MPAs.
- Add conservation objectives to the management plans for B.C. Parks that were designated for recreation, or do not count them as "marine protected areas."
- Meet commitment to protect five percent of the coastal and marine environment by 2017, and 10 percent by 2020. Increase the area of MPAs in Howe Sound.
- Clearly distinguish between conservation objectives and recreation objectives when designating new enhanced management areas. Acknowledge that designation of areas primarily for recreation is not equivalent to designation of areas for conservation.

Resources

Protect Plant Ocean

protectplanetocean.org/introduction

B.C. Parks

env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/

Canadian Commission for UNESCO

unesco.ca/home-accueil/ccu

Footnotes

¹ <http://futureofhowesound.org/campaigns/exploring-unesco-biosphere-reserve-status/>

² <http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/species-especes/act-loi/habitat-eng.htm>

³ <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2016ENV0031-000859>

⁴ Chu, J.W.F., M. Maldonado, G. Yahel, and S.P. Leys. 2011. Glass sponge reefs as a silicon sink. *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 441: 1-14. doi: 10.3354/meps09381

⁵ http://www.pac.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/oceans/protection/sponge_reef-ricif_eponge-eng.html

⁶ Robb, C.K., K.M. Bodtker, and K. Wright. 2015. Marine Protected Areas in the Canadian Pacific: Do They Fulfill Network Criteria? *Coastal Management* 43(3): 253-269. doi: 10.1080/08920753.2015.1030306

⁷ Reproduced with permission from “Where Rivers, Mountains and People Meet”, Squamish Lilwat Cultural Centre

⁸ Some non-government and marine conservation organizations do not consider these to be marine protected areas, but call them “recreation areas” for this reason.

⁹ Robb, C.K., K.M. Bodtker, K. Wright, and J. Lash. 2010. Commercial fisheries closures in marine protected areas on Canada’s Pacific coast: The exception not the rule. *Marine Policy* 35(2011): 309-316. doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2010.10.010

¹⁰ Robb et al. 2015.

¹¹ From management plans; see www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks, www.env.gov.bc.ca/fw/habitat/conservation-lands/wma/skwelwil_em

¹² Taylor, A. Email communication with the author, Sep 29, 2016.

¹³ [https://bowenland.civicweb.net/document/78827/151026%20RC%20FINAL%20\(E\).pdf?handle=89B91ABB08B24E6E9185CA06408FF9BA](https://bowenland.civicweb.net/document/78827/151026%20RC%20FINAL%20(E).pdf?handle=89B91ABB08B24E6E9185CA06408FF9BA)

¹⁴ <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-fisheries-oceans-and-canadian-coast-guard-mandate-letter>

¹⁵ <http://mpanetwork.ca/bcnorthernshelf/whats-happening/>