



ORIGIN STORY

Ascension Island Marine Protected Area

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How an ambitious island community became a world leader in marine conservation

The waters surrounding Ascension Island in the South Atlantic Ocean have long been recognised for their varied and abundant marine life (Ascension Island Government 2021 b). In recent years, threats to that abundance have led to efforts to conserve and protect the region's environment. Concerns about the state of global tuna fisheries were especially important to inspiring calls for a marine protected area around Ascension, which has been called a "Jurassic Park for fish" due to the exceptionally large marlin and yellowfin tuna that frequent the island (Mission Blue).

In 2013 Mission Blue, a foundation started by famed marine biologist Sylvia Earle, described Ascension as a global 'hope spot' worthy of protection (Mission Blue). Great British Oceans, a coalition of six conservation charities, added its support to the campaign in 2014 (IUCN 2015). In response to public interest in ocean conservation, the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom pledged in its 2015 manifesto to create a "blue belt" of protected ocean around the UK's Overseas Territories, subject to local support and environmental need (UK Conservative Party 2015).

The year after winning election in 2015, the Conservative Government announced its intention to create a marine reserve around Ascension that would ban commercial fishing and mining "to protect its varied and unique ecosystem including some of the largest marlin in the world, large populations of green turtle and the island's own species of frigate bird" (Harrabin 2016). A meeting of "leading scientists, conservationists, and policy makers" was then held to assess research needs for effective placement and management of the future MPA (Ascension Island Government 2016). At that point over half of the Ascension Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was temporarily closed to large scale commercial fishing with the expectation that this restriction would soon become permanent (Turnbull 2018). The Louis Bacon Foundation provided a grant of £300,000 to support surveillance and enforcement, and this support was continued by the UK Government's Blue Belt Programme in subsequent years (Harrabin 2016). A Biodiversity Committee containing elected members of the Ascension Island Council was also established to guide the policy development process. (Baum 2021)

From 2015 leading up to designation, Ascension Island Government scientists and international partners worked to identify important habitats within the Ascension EEZ. The Ascension Island Government Conservation and Fisheries Directorate (AIGCFD) compiled this information and produced an MPA Evidence and Options document for presentation to the Ascension Island Council (Ascension Island Government 2018 a). AIGCFD published the options document in November 2018, requesting public feedback before its official recommendation to the Governor of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan Da Cunha in 2019 (Ascension Island Government 2018 b). The document laid out three options, with two entailing the protection of 50% of Ascension Island's EEZ and the third protecting 100% (Ascension Island Government 2018 a). The three options were:

50% protection: The “Pokémon model,” nicknamed for its shape, which would keep the northern part of the EEZ open to commercial fishing but close the southern part where Ascension Island and some seamounts are located (Ascension Island Government 2018 b; Baum 2021)

1. 50% protection: Protect the same amount of ocean as option 1, but this time focusing on biodiversity hotspots around the island, nearby seamounts, and along a migration corridor for turtles (Ascension Island Government 2018 b)
2. 100% protection: Close the entire EEZ to commercial fishing and mining (Ibid.).
3. The costs and benefits of each of the three options were reported in the Evidence and Options document to allow a fair assessment of which was best for Ascension Island (Ibid.).

A public consultation was then held to present the results of scientific studies, the objectives of the MPA, and the three protection options being considered. Meetings were held in each of the main settlements on Ascension, at the island school, and in workplaces. Overall, about one third of the people living on Ascension attended these meetings (Baum 2021). The Great British Oceans coalition and other international environmental groups advocated for the most ambitious “100% protection” option (Great British Oceans; PEW 2019).

The elected members of the Ascension Island Council considered the views expressed in the consultation and the content of the Evidence and Options paper. They decided that Ascension’s future lay in being a world leader in marine conservation rather than in continuing the industrial-scale exploitation of its fish stocks (Baum 2021). Their only concern was the need to secure financial support from the UK Government to ensure the effective management of the MPA (Baum 2021). In February 2019 the Island Council recommended to the Governor of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan Da Cunha that 100% of the Ascension Island EEZ should be protected within an MPA if funding support could be provided from the UK Government (Ascension Island Government 2019).

In March 2019, the UK Government agreed to support the Ascension Island Council’s proposal to designate a 445,000-square-kilometre (171,000-square-mile) MPA that would cover the island’s entire EEZ (Great British Oceans). The MPA was designated on August 30th, 2019, officially prohibiting large-scale commercial fishing and the extraction of minerals (Ascension Island Government 2021 a). The Ascension Island Government celebrated the achievement, lauding the MPA as the result of “many years of data gathering, planning and consultation supported by the UK government’s Blue Belt Programme, funding from Darwin Plus, EU BEST, the Great British Oceans Coalition, as well as input from academic institutions, and most importantly the elected Council and people of Ascension” (Ascension Island Government 2021 a).

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