Marine World Heritage: the time is now

Protecting the 'best of the best' in the ocean

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> The Wadden Sea acts as a crucial staging post for many species, providing them with enough food to complete their long journey .

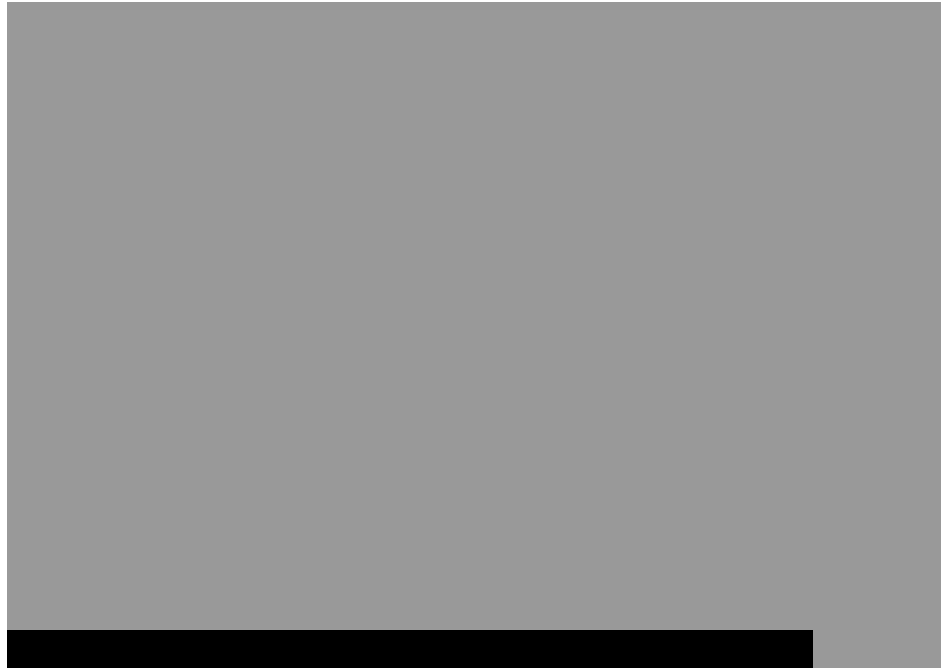sites for their marine values. Among these new biodiversity treasures is The Wadden

Giant grouper in Colombia's Malpelo Fauna and Flora Sanctuary World Heritage site.

and thoroughly as cultural and natural values are recognized on land. First, out of almost 900 existing World Heritage sites, only 41 (less than 5per cent) are inscribed for their marine values (outstanding biodiversity and/or ecology). Considering

Since its inception in 2005, the mission of the World Heritage Marine Programme has been to safeguard the world's most outstanding marine sites, to make sure they will be preserved and allowed to thrive for generations to come   .

So how do we go about improving the situation? Reference to terrestrial boundaries (such as continents) or terrestrial ecosystem-type classifications makes little sense when it comes to identifying 'marine gaps' in the World Heritage List. Instead we need to use a framework that reflects the true nature of the ocean and its inhabitants. To support its work, IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas has pragmatically divided up the ocean into large regions. In this perspective, World Heritage sites are clearly underrepresented in five marine regions, including the Northwest Atlantic, East Africa, Antarctica, North West Pacific, and the Arabian Sea. The 2009 Bahrain workshop concluded that the Arabian Sea in particular holds various marine biodiversity treasures that should be inscribed on the World Heritage List, including vast meadows of seagrass, amazing aggregations of large marine species and spectacular coral reefs.

While regional representation is important, attention should also be given to a properly balanced approach to different types of marine ecosystem under the Convention. This would ensure that in addition to coral reefs (that form about 25 per cent of all the inscribed marine World Heritage sites) the World Heritage List also reflects the 'best of the best' of other types of marine ecosystem, such as kelp forests, seamounts and rocky reefs. Nations need help to achieve this and there is a clear need for better guidance. To address this concern IUCN is currently developing a thematic study that will provide better advice and help to address major gaps relating to marine World Heritage. The study will lay the scientific foundation for a well-balanced and representative set of marine World Heritage sites that will help to inform choices when nominating or inscribing sites relating to key marine regions or ecosystem types that are over-, under-, or not at all represented. This work is scheduled to begin in 2010 together with

places on the high seas that are eminently worthy of protection but there is far more to be discovered with many areas as yet unexplored and unmapped.

Some of the known areas are also familiar to the public. In 2008, for the first time, the Marine Conservation Biology Institute (based in Seattle, United States), in cooperation with IUCN-WCPA, id.333 7TJ 0 -1.333 (a)-8(t)-321(o)]TJ -343W0(e)-13(a)-8(m)-17(e

Recent developments such as the WCPA's innovative work with Google in producing 'Ocean in Google Earth' (Google Earth 5.0) allow all existing marine World Heritage sites to be viewed online, as part of the wider network of roughly 4,500 Marine Protected Areas established to date to help to protect the ocean. Through Protect Planet Ocean (www.protectplanetocean.org) it is now possible to upload pictures, films and stories about these sites for viewing through Google Earth, and to share their wonders with a potential worldwide audience of half a billion people.

confronted with them?