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New Special Closures: An Innovative way to Protect Seabird Colonies

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California has recognized that oceans are in need of increased protection from the multitude of human-caused threats to the extraordinary diversity of our coastal marine life. The Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) of 1999, an ecosystem-based approach to ocean management, is one of the ways that the state has addressed these threats. The MLPA requires California to construct a statewide network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to protect the natural diversity of marine life and the structure, function, and integrity of marine ecosystems.

A MPA is similar to a national park and is designed to protect a marine or estuarine habitat as well as its flora and fauna. Studies of marine protected areas show greater species diversity and larger fish inside compared to areas outside of reserves. Reserves can be sources to replenish nearby non-reserve areas through spillover and by protecting the spawning (parent) populations. The types of activities allowed in MPAs differ among four designations: marine reserves, marine parks, marine conservation areas and state marine recreational management areas.

- State Marine Reserves: no-take, no fishing and may also limit access
- State Marine Parks: recreational fishing is allowed
- State Marine Conservation Areas: restrictions may be in place for certain species
- State Marine Recreational Management Areas: certain recreational use is allowed, such as waterfowl hunting, while extraction of sub-tidal living marine resources is prohibited.

The ecosystem approach of the MLPA uses the “best readily available science” and stakeholder input to design an effective network on complementary protected areas. This approach is based on the understanding that protecting a network of essential habitat conserves an entire ecosystem in a more robust and effective way than the species-specific traditional fisheries management strategy.

The MLPA affects the state waters along the California coast to three nautical miles offshore and includes bays, estuaries and islands. The intention is to protect marine life and habitat, as well as the coastal communities that rely on ocean resources by establishing a network of MPAs. The MLPA also seeks to improve educational, recreational and scientific research opportunities on the coast using conservation based goals.

The 1,100 miles of the California coast has been divided into five study regions. The regions are: 1) North Coast: CA/OR border to Alder Creek near Point Arena; 2) North Central Coast: Alder Creek to Pigeon Point; 3) Central Coast: Pigeon Point to Point Conception; 4) South Coast: Point Conception to the CA/Mexico border; and 5) San Francisco Bay: waters within San Francisco Bay. The Central Coast and North Central Coast have both completed their processes, the most recent one being the north central coast region, which encompasses 153 square miles from Alder Creek, near Pt. Arena to Pigeon Point in San Mateo County, including the Farallon Islands. This area includes 86 square miles of no-take marine reserves. The process began in May 2007, and the Fish and Game Commission adopted the plan on August 5, 2009. The new MPAs in the north central coast region go into effect April 2010. Details on specific MPAs and limits on take for each area can be found online at www.dfg.ca.gov/mlpa/.

The objectives of most California MPAs are to protect fish and underwater habitat.

However, the North-central Coast regional stakeholders acknowledged that it was also important to protect seabirds and marine mammals because of the area’s historic populations, high species diversity, and known issues with disturbance. Therefore, the region took a new approach with the adoption of Special Closures, which restrict human access to areas that are home to the most diverse and abundant seabird and marine mammal breeding populations in the region. The areas are small when compared to the larger no-take marine reserves or other MPAs. The objective of Special Closures is simple: minimize disturbance from close-approaching vessels.

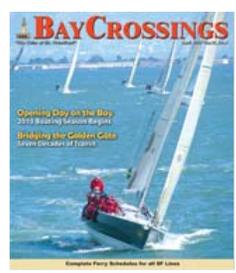
Seabirds that nest and roost on cliffs and offshore rocks are highly susceptible to human disturbance, especially close approaching vessels. High levels of disturbance can impact colonies through the disruption of nest prospecting, courtship, feeding of young, and can lead to nest, egg, or chick loss or abandonment.

The Special Closures are an important step in the protection of seabirds along our coast. The six closures are the Point Reyes Headlands, Point Resistance, Stormy Stack, Devil’s Slide Rock, North Farallon Island and Southeast Farallon Island and West End. Restrictions on approach distances to each Special Closure vary depending on the site and are between 300-1,000 feet. Local monitoring data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service demonstrate that these distances can reduce disturbances by as much as 95 percent.

The Seabird Protection Network urges boaters to steer clear of seabirds and remain at least 1,000 feet away from all breeding colonies, which will help seabird populations to grow.

You can help! Boater-friendly information in the form of tide books and other materials are available from the Seabird Protection Network. Keep informed about Marine Protected Areas and Special Closures and the locations of your local seabird breeding colonies so you can maintain safe distances.

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