

A Masterplan for 10 Marine Protected Areas in Israel's EEZ

As part of a special conference in honor of International Oceans Day, today (June 1st, 2023) in Haifa, policy makers and government officials, representatives of the academy, nature conservation organizations and experts gathered to formulate a policy for the protection of the deep sea and launched a new master plan for 10 MPAs in Israel's EEZ which will protect 30% of Israel's deep sea, by 2030.



Photo: Asi Efrati

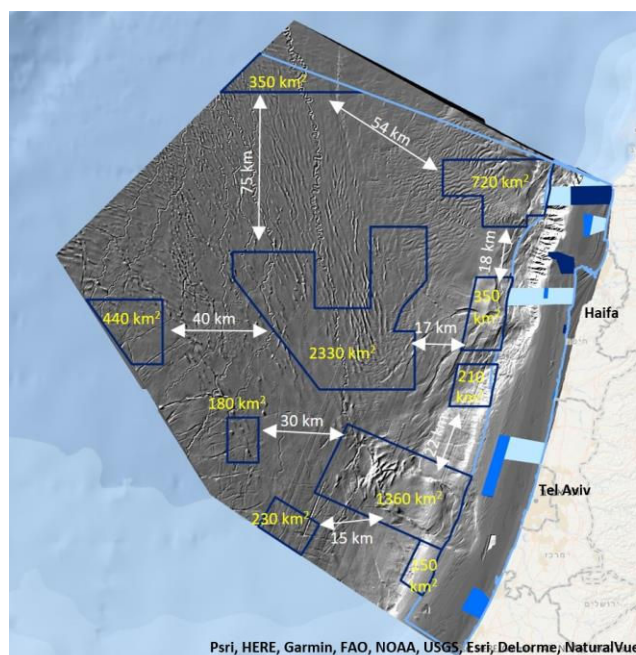
The Minister of Environment has officially adopted The Society for The Protection of Nature in Israel new masterplan for marine reserves in the Israeli EEZ. The new masterplan constitutes the road map for realizing the national goal of 30% protection of the marine area, with a total scope of 6,000 square kilometers, by the year 2030, through 10 new nature reserves. If the plan is adopted by the government and implemented, it will provide protection to 80% of the area of the unique habitats and 89% of the representative ecological units will receive a proper and satisfactory protection. This will protect the unique ecosystem of the deep sea, including corals, sponge mats, gas seeps, and living grounds and migration routes of sharks, fish, marine mammals and sea turtles.

As part of the masterplan, 5 marine reserves are designed to protect the continental slope, where the sea floor drops from a depth of about 200 meters, to a depth of over 1,000 meters. In this space, sensitive species were identified both in the seabed and in the water column above it. 5 additional reserves are intended to protect the bathyal area: a relatively flat area of the deep sea at a depth of

over 1,000 meters, where sensitive habitats have been located, such as sponge mats, gas seeps, and eddies (sites where there is an increase in nutrient-rich currents from the depths to the surface of the sea). One of the reserves in the plan is an expansion of the Palmahim Slide Hope Spot, which was declared a marine reserve in 2022, the first in Israel's EEZ.

The smallest reserve is planned to be 150 square kilometers, and the largest 2,300 square kilometers. In addition, the plan designates a number of reserves, as a "climate refuge area", which can provide a refuge for species that might migrate to the depths, following the warming of the sea. Two more reserves are designed to serve as international reserves, which will connect to possible protected areas in Cyprus, Egypt and possibly even Lebanon.

The new master plan was launched at the "Deep Sea - Nature Conservation, Research, Innovation" conference, which took place at the University of Haifa, in partnership with the Society for the Protection of Nature, the Charney School of Marine Sciences, at the University of Haifa, the Nature and Parks Authority, the Ministry for Environmental Protection, the Israel Oceanographic and Limnologic Research Institute, the Mediterranean Sea Research Center of Israel, the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History at Tel Aviv University, the Antiquities Authority and other partners. As part of the conference, there were discussions on the implementation of the plan, alongside the presentation of the research and regulatory issues regarding the protection of the deep sea.



[The Masterplan \(Hebrew\)](#)



Minister of Environmental Protection, Idit Silman: "It is a great privilege for me to adopt the master plan for marine nature reserves and promote it, with the aim of preserving treasures and natural resources, for the well-being of the public and future generations".

Professor Mona Maron, Vice President and Dean of Research at the University of Haifa: "We must strengthen and preserve the marine ecosystems, which are a habitat for a huge variety of marine animals. By investing in such conservation initiatives, we can protect the diversity and resilience of our seas".

The Nature and Parks Authority, CEO, Raya Shurki: "We see the master plan as a layer that will direct development to the right places, in order to reduce environmental damage, in accordance with scientific research. This is a plan written by a large team of scientists, researchers and reviewers. The Nature and Parks Authority sees great importance in preserving nature and heritage values at sea and promoting marine reserves. In this framework, we have established a maritime unit, which works day and night, to supervise and enforce the regulations in the maritime space. The sea is a complex work environment and additional special efforts are required to implement enforcement in the deep sea. This is a great responsibility of The Nature and Park Authority, which takes upon itself the implementation of the plan. In the coming years, we will build and strengthen our maritime system, to support the protected areas, in Israel's EEZ."

Dan Alon, the incoming CEO of the Society for the Protection of Nature: "When it comes to nature conservation, it seems we are always late, trying to undo damage that has already occurred. But with the deep sea we have an opportunity to protect this relatively unaffected area before it's too late. Now, with the launch of the program, we have a road map on how to do it. We appeal to the government: please find the necessary budgets and resources, to implement the plan, from paper, to realization. We need the government to be onboard, so that our wonderful deep sea will be protected."

IOLR, CEO, Alon Zasek: "In the next decade, the sea in general and the deep sea in particular, will be at the center of national activity and any future activity and conservation in the sea must be based on research and supporting data. To this end, the resources must be allocated ahead of time, in order to be able to make informed decisions, in everything related to the sea."

Prior to the adoption of the plan by The Ministry of Environmental Protection, letters in support of the masterplan were sent to the decision makers from national and international organization, such Mission Blue, founded by Dr. Sylvia Earle.

According to the Society for the Protection of Nature, in the Israeli deep sea, there is incredible biological diversity in need of protection. In recent years, the deep Mediterranean Sea has been designated as a major target for protection by international nature conservation organizations. The



area of Israel's exclusive economic zone, in the Mediterranean Sea, extends over 21 thousand square kilometers, similar in scope to the land area of the State of Israel. This area, which includes many deep sea habitats, is the area where flagship species live and roam, such as sharks, dolphins, whales and sea turtles, and a breeding site for Bluefin tuna and deep-sea sharks. In this space, there are complex and unique habitats, which include deep-sea coral gardens, as well as cold gas seeps and brine pools, where a unique natural world relies on the chemical energy of gases, which emanate from the sea floor.

However, in this exact area, development pressures are increasing: the Ministry of Energy's has intentions to expand gas exploration and lay infrastructure for its export, destructive fishing activities and intentions for further economic development, such as renewable energies and aquaculture are also on the agenda. Therefore, there is urgency in promoting protection of the area, within the framework of a master plan.

The Society for the Protection of Nature explains that while the countries of the world are in a race to protect the maritime space, within the framework of treaties, which state that at least 30% of the sea surfaces must be protected, as protected areas, for the purpose of preserving nature and meeting the global climate goals, the deep sea in Israel's EEZ, so far has had no spatial planning at all, let alone the consideration of conservation aspects. All this, despite the fact that Israel is committed to the goals of the 2012 Montreal Convention on Biological Diversity and the 2021 Barcelona Convention and is supposed to protect 30% of the marine area by 2030 - only 7 years from today.

The Society for The Protection of Nature's masterplan is partnered with The Ministry for Environmental protection, The Nature and Parks Authority, the Antiquities Authority, the Charney School of Marine Sciences at the University of Haifa, the Oceanographic and Limnological Research Institute, Tel-Aviv University and the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History.

More than 20 researchers and professionals participated in the preparation of the program, including several different academic institutions, thousands of observations from the deep sea were gathered and analyzed, and advanced research tools were used for spatial analysis. The process was accompanied by a scientific advisory committee, with the participation of dozens of researchers, overseen by two renowned scientific consultants: Prof. Yoni Belmaker, from Tel Aviv University, and Prof. Eric Cordes, from Temple University in Philadelphia. The process of preparing the plan, which lasted about two years, included the participation of the various stakeholders, as part of a steering committee, in which representatives of the government, academia, and non-governmental organizations were present. The steering committee met five times throughout the process. In addition, a public participation meeting was held.

