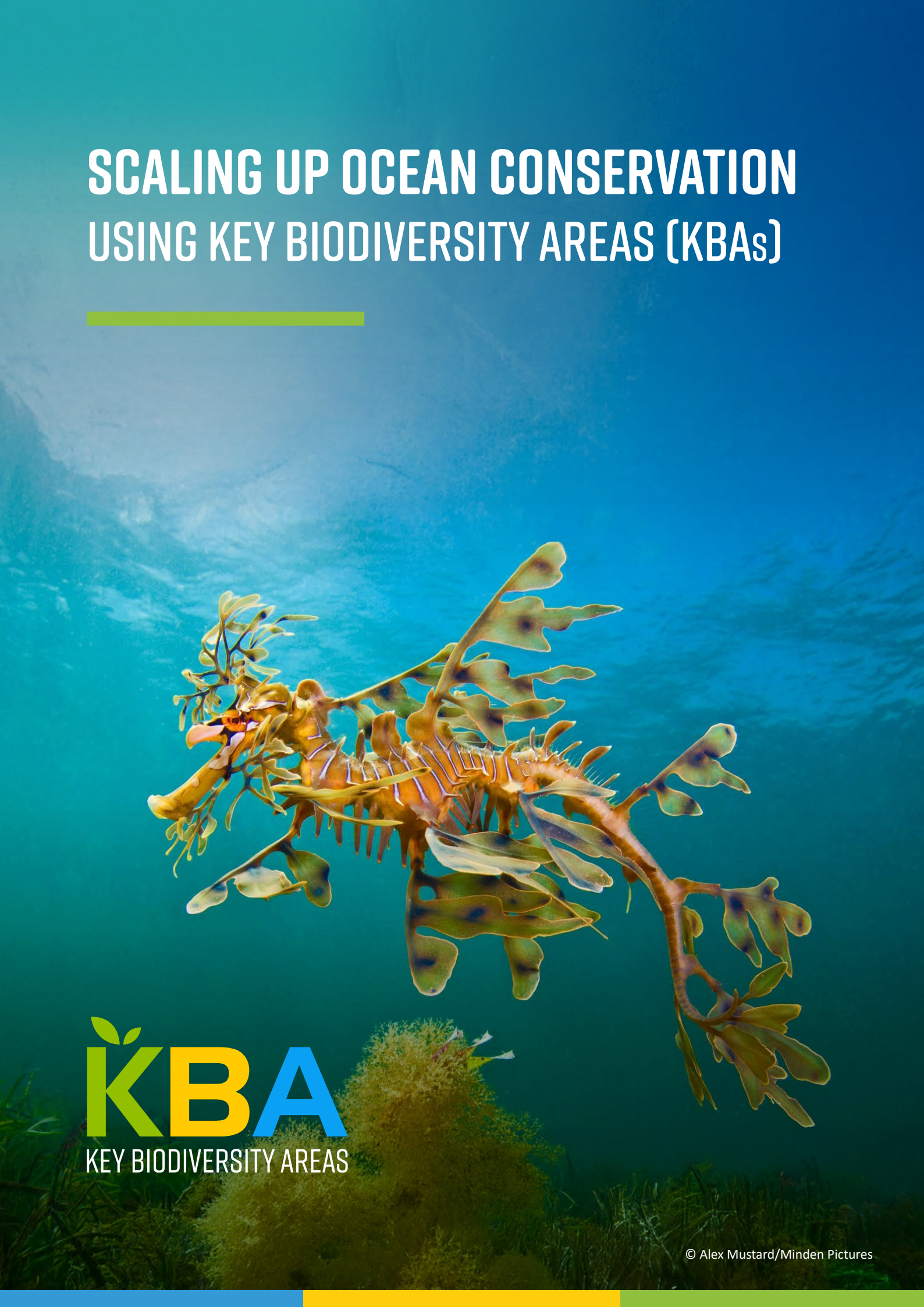
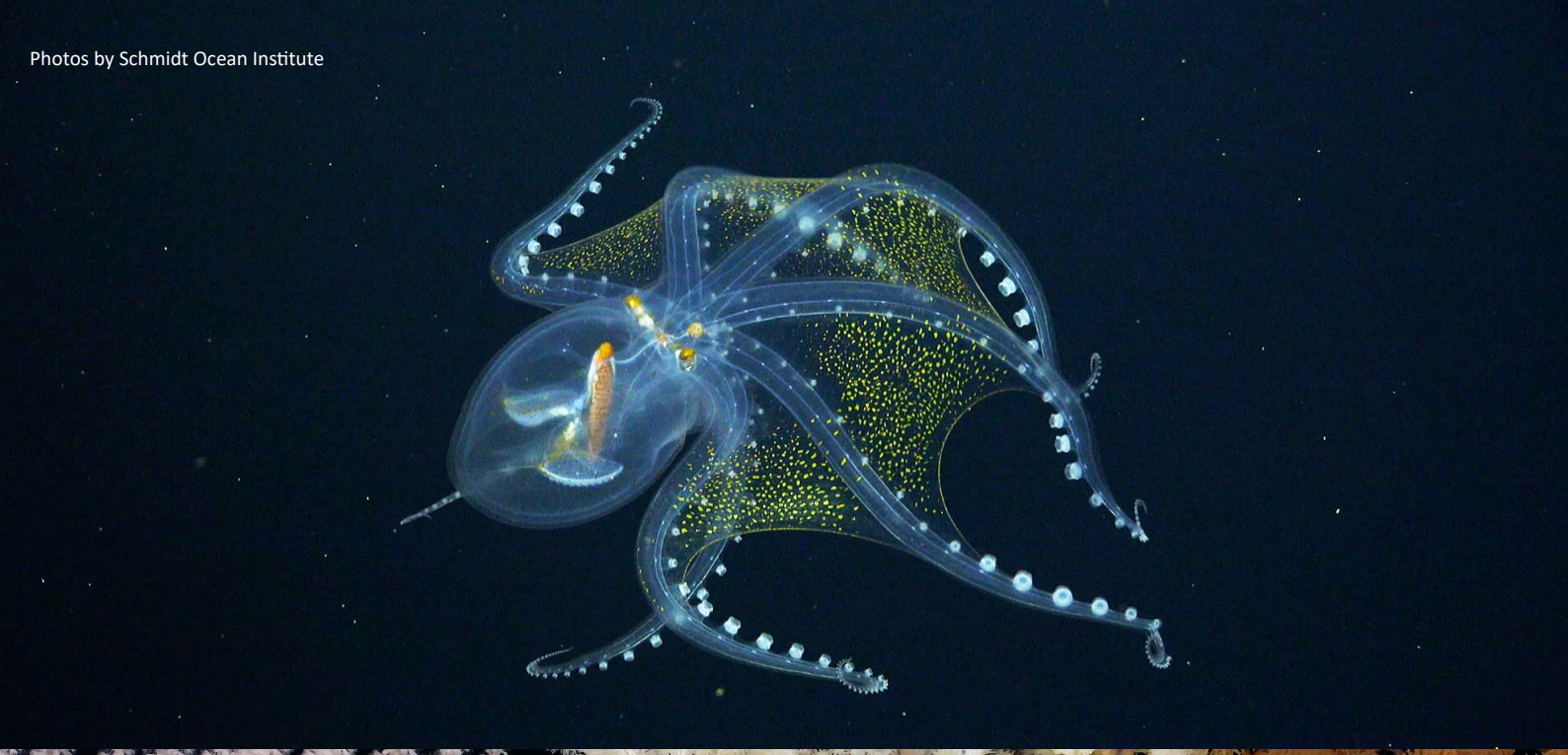
# SCALING UP OCEAN CONSERVATION
## USING KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS (KBAs)



KBA
KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS

Photos by Schmidt Ocean Institute



The Ocean is our life-support system. From food to energy and climate – healthy seas provide vital resources and services for people and the planet. Recognition of **Key Biodiversity Areas** within planning processes can ensure ocean benefits are safeguarded for future generations.

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# INTRODUCTION

Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) are recognised as globally significant sites for the conservation and persistence of biodiversity. KBAs provide a scientifically robust and globally standardised framework to map and prioritise actions, including to guide selection, establishment and management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) towards 2030 and beyond.

By identifying KBAs, governments can strategically direct scarce conservation resources to the most important places in our ocean. Additionally, KBAs enable us to effectively monitor success and facilitate harmonised reporting under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the forthcoming Agreement on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement), and other Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs).

This briefing highlights how governments can benefit from KBAs in the ocean, from mapping MPAs to mainstreaming KBAs in spatial planning and management. It also provides examples of how countries are identifying and using KBAs.

# WHY WE NEED KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS FOR OUR OCEAN NOW

Our ocean is in poor health. Governments have agreed on targets to halt biodiversity loss and restore marine ecosystems to reverse this trend. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) sets targets for 2030 to put 100% of the world's ocean under integrated **spatial planning** and management (Target 1), to **restore** at least 30% of degraded areas (Target 2) and to effectively **conserve at least 30% of the world's ocean** through MPAs and other effective area-based conservation measures (Target 3).

The gap in achieving Target 3 is particularly striking in the High Seas – where a mere 1.5% is currently protected. These areas beyond national jurisdiction constitute 64% of our ocean's surface and 95% of its volume. Decisions by the UN General Assembly, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) have made it clear: establishing protected and conserved areas as part of a comprehensive ecological network is critical for bolstering resilience and adaptation in the face of climate change.

# GLOBAL STANDARD FOR IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT SITES FOR ALL SPECIES AND ECOSYSTEMS


The KBAs programme is managed by 13 leading global conservation organisations, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). These organisations have united under the KBA Partnership to actively collaborate with governments and MEAs to identify, map, monitor and conserve KBAs **for all species and ecosystems**, as well as areas of high ecological integrity. By using defined criteria and quantitative thresholds to identify sites, KBAs can be compared across countries and regions, making them valuable indicators for tracking progress in protecting biodiversity. As a result, KBAs have become established as a high-level reporting tool, for example under the monitoring framework of the GBF, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators (such as **Goal 14 on Life below Water**), CMS and in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) under the CBD.

## HOW KBAs RELATE TO OTHER IMPORTANT MARINE AREA APPROACHES

KBAs are complementary to other important marine area approaches and spatial planning tools, such as Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs), Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs), Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs), and Important Marine Turtle Areas (IMTAs). Such areas could be KBAs but often lack the required quantitative data. In summary, KBAs:

- Cover **all macroscopic taxonomic groups** and ecosystem types with one **consistent methodology**, ensuring a more comprehensive approach to biodiversity conservation.
- Are **identified at a site scale** so they can be managed as a single unit, making them highly actionable for policy, conservation, and investment decisions.
- Can **integrate** data from IMMAs, ISRAs, and IMTAs, while maintaining a broader conservation scope, and can also inform the description of EBSAs in both national waters and in areas beyond national jurisdiction.
- Focus not only on individual species or ecosystems, but also **ecological integrity** and biological processes.

Further information on the different approaches for identifying areas of particular importance for marine biodiversity can be found in this **IUCN Technical Note**.

# WHY MARINE KBAs MATTER

## 1 Informed Marine Spatial Planning (MSP)


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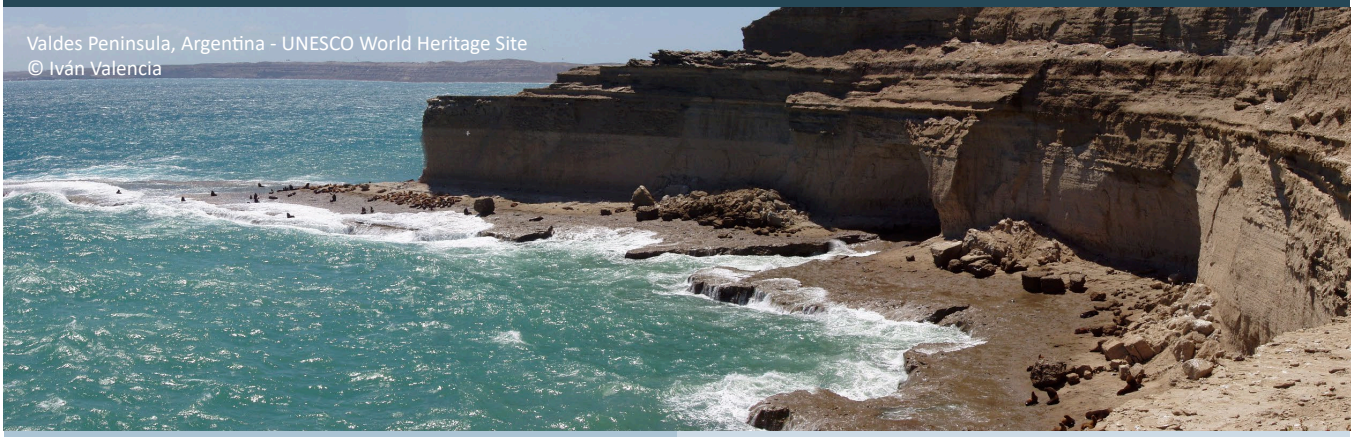
- Marine KBAs facilitate identification of high-quality, globally recognised sites via a globally accessible platform, that governments can integrate into spatial planning and management processes. Each KBA holds at least one globally significant species population or ecosystem type, hosts important biological processes or is a site of outstanding ecological integrity or irreplaceability.

- KBAs should be managed in such a way that the biodiversity elements that trigger KBA status are safeguarded and do not decline. As such they can contribute to balancing nature conservation with economic activities such as energy development and fisheries; and thereby contribute to achieving Target 1 of the GBF and other global targets.

## 2 Identify Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) and More


Valdes Peninsula, Argentina - UNESCO World Heritage Site
© Iván Valencia

- Marine KBAs serve as a scientifically sound basis for identifying and expanding MPAs, as well as other area designations, such as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

- KBAs support the recognition of OECMs by providing biodiversity data for manageable units, helping governments meet and monitor international targets while respecting local stakeholder interests.

## 3 Monitoring Progress and International Policy Alignment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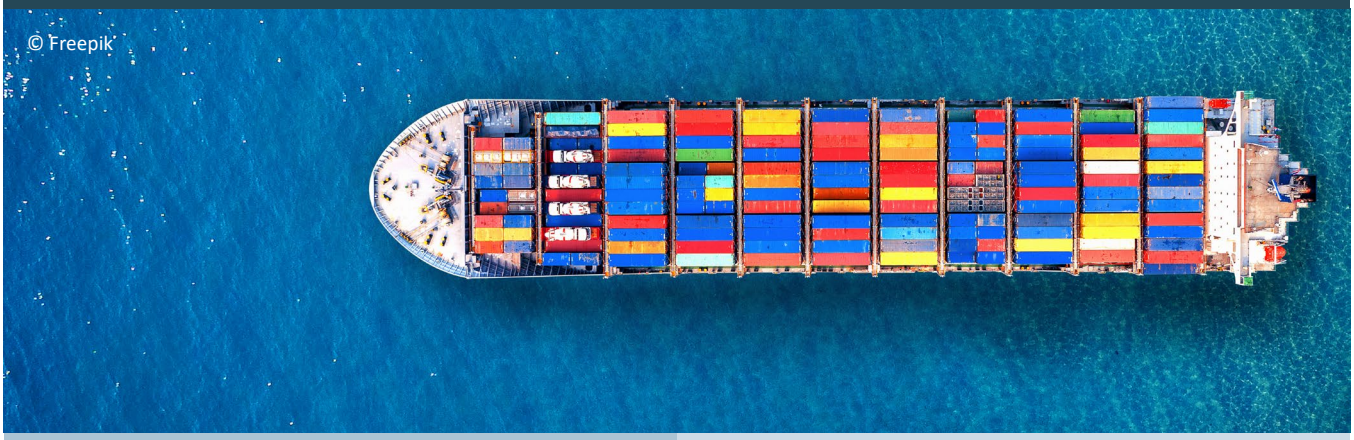
- KBAs are recognised as a high-level reporting tool for monitoring progress toward global biodiversity conservation goals across terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems, notably the GBF (specifically Targets 1, 2 and 3) and the SDGs (specifically Goal 14).
- KBAs support governments in setting national targets and actions under MEAs, including NBSAPs under the CBD, UNESCO World Heritage Convention, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, CMS, and other instruments.

## 4 Guide Nature-Positive Investment and Business Development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- Multilateral funds and private sector commonly use KBAs as an objective standard to assess operational footprints and biodiversity risks. KBAs are recognised by the International Finance Corporation's Performance Standard 6 and the Equator Principles and form the core of the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT).
- KBAs can guide nature-positive growth in offshore renewables and development of infrastructure. Industries such as shipping, tourism and fisheries can use KBA information to minimise environmental impact while meeting corporate sustainability targets.

## 5 Contribute to Coherent Environmental Assessments


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- KBAs are integrated into environmental screening tools, enabling better-informed Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA).
- KBAs can strengthen the application of coherent EIAs and Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) in the marine environment, which is a widespread mandate across MEAs, as well as under Part IV of the BBNJ Agreement.

## 6 Strengthening Ocean Funding and Governance


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- Governments and other stakeholders can use KBA data to develop biodiversity offsets and to secure funding from international donors, including the GEF, development banks and private sector investors committed to biodiversity-friendly development.
- KBAs are a "bottom up" planning tool, enhancing collaboration between government agencies, local people, indigenous people, private sector, science, NGOs and other stakeholders through National Coordination Groups (NGGs).

# CALL TO ACTION FOR GOVERNMENTS

Governments have a unique opportunity to leverage marine KBAs as a strategic tool for nature-positive spatial planning, sustainable development and international compliance. To maximise the benefits of KBAs, governments should:

- **Commit to updating and expanding KBA assessments** to close the current gaps in geographic coverage across the ocean and ensure that the most relevant and current biodiversity data is used.
- **Establish and support KBA National Coordination Groups (NCGs)** to collate and harmonise national biodiversity data and enhance multi-sectoral collaboration on marine conservation.
- **Integrate KBAs into national and international law and planning** on ocean conservation, marine spatial planning, and environmental assessments.

By taking these steps, governments can not only meet international biodiversity and ocean targets more effectively but also ensure that nature-positive economic growth will safeguard our marine ecosystems for future generations.

## WHAT ARE KBA NATIONAL COORDINATION GROUPS?

One of the principles of the KBA Programme is the strong involvement of local experts and stakeholders in the identification and documentation of KBAs. To ensure the coordination and collaboration of national experts representing different taxonomic groups and biodiversity elements it is recommended to establish KBA National Coordination Groups (KBA NCGs) working towards the development of a single, coherent list of KBAs in each country.

This grassroots, country-led approach can bring together government departments, scientific institutions, private sector, local communities, indigenous peoples and other stakeholders to mobilise and harmonise local biodiversity knowledge. The KBA NCG may act as a proposer of KBAs or as a reviewer of proposals made by independent experts within or outside the country. The KBA NCG may also decide to coordinate activities between different stakeholders to promote the conservation and management of KBAs at the national level.

By May 2025, 40+ countries have established NCGs, of which 11 have made comprehensive assessments of their KBAs on land and 6 have also assessed their marine KBAs with the data available. An additional two countries are in the process of finalising terrestrial and marine assessments.

Support for guidance in establishing and managing these groups, training, and help in KBA identification is available through the KBA Secretariat to establish NCGs:
www.keybiodiversityareas.org

# EXAMPLES OF WHERE GOVERNMENTS ARE IDENTIFYING AND USING MARINE KBAS

Many countries have identified marine KBAs. We give four examples of how this has happened and how the KBAs are being used by governments.

## 1 Ecuador: Enhancing alignment between national and local level conservation actions

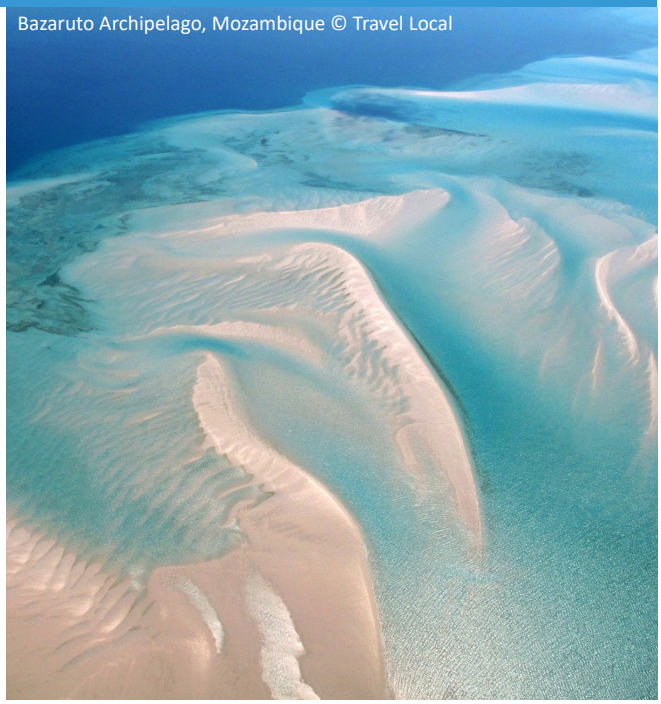
Ecuador is using marine KBAs to guide conservation actions towards Target 3 under the GBF and to track progress on SDG implementation. Eleven marine KBAs in Ecuador were identified through a collaborative process involving experts, conservation organisations, and local stakeholders under the KBA NCG. New KBA candidates were identified through alignment with national protected areas and areas designated for sustainable use or conservation by local governments, ensuring the consideration of Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs). At the subnational level, the Consortium of Autonomous Provincial Governments of Ecuador has incorporated KBAs into its Natural Heritage Strategic Management Manual to prioritise conservation actions and manage funding effectively.


Galapagos, Ecuador © Andy J. Plumptre

## 2 Mozambique: Safeguarding critical marine sites from development

Mozambique has successfully applied marine KBAs to implement Target 3 on MPAs and Target 1 on Marine Spatial Planning under the GBF. A total of nine coastal and four offshore KBAs were established, which contributed to boosting the protected area coverage of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) from 2.1 to 4.6%.

All marine KBAs have been included in the National Marine Spatial Plan as areas to be avoided by development projects. Marine KBAs have also been earmarked to receive biodiversity offsets, for example when new MPAs are established. This breakthrough enables project developers to contribute directly to Target 3 of the GBF. Overall, the designation as KBAs has strengthened fundraising and protection of marine sites.


Bazaruto Archipelago, Mozambique © Travel Local

## 3 Philippines: A whole-of-society approach to accelerate ocean action

The Philippines have been applying KBAs to guide MPA designations in order to achieve Target 3 under the GBF, as well as within their NBSAPs. Since 2009, when a total of 249 potential marine KBAs were first identified, 133 marine KBAs have now been officially recognized. This recognition resulted from a comprehensive series of workshops and extensive stakeholder participation, which included input from civil society, NGOs, local government, and Indigenous Peoples' communities. During this process other biodiversity designations such as IMMAS, ISRAs, Ramsar sites, as well as a wealth of new information on threats, managements and other factors were analysed.

A national NCG has been established in order to assist the formal designation of the Philippine KBAs, ensuring their integration into national and local government development and management planning, thereby enhancing protection and strengthening resilience across ecosystems.

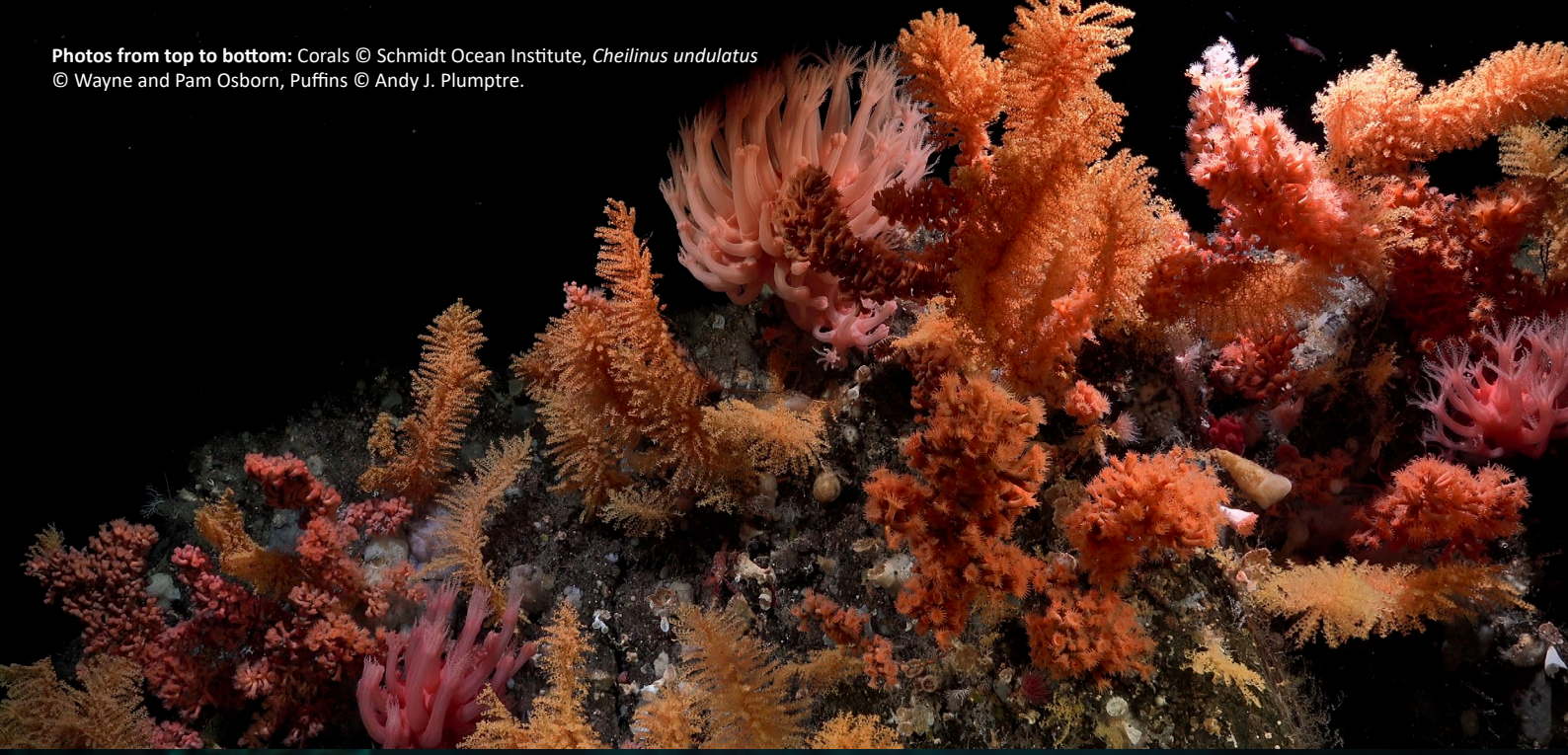
Coron Island, Philippines © Michael Fitzgerald

## 4 South Georgia & Sandwich Islands: KBAs contributing to environmental assessments

In the South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands of the Southern Ocean, the government re-evaluates fisheries operations in the exclusive economic zone every five years. Through marine KBA identification and overlap assessment of KBAs with fisheries operating areas, the government established how fisheries could continue to operate profitably while adhering to regulations that enable conservation of globally important sites for marine biodiversity.[1]

South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands © Se Mo

1 For further information consult Handley et al. (2020).



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