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Strengthening the Ross Sea Research and Monitoring Plan to deliver effective, measurable, and robust management

Submitted by ASOC



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Strengthening the Ross Sea Research and Monitoring Plan to Deliver Effective, Measurable, and Robust Management Submitted by ASOC¹

Abstract

The intersessional process to develop a Ross Sea Region Marine Protected Area (RSRMPA) has been extremely fruitful, and ASOC appreciates the work of the conveners and participants in drafting the plan. ASOC supports the implementation of the RMP, but recognizes it is a living document that will be refined over time. Thus, ASOC recommends that the importance of developing indicators and defining baselines should be highlighted more strongly; that baselines and indicators be identified where possible; that the linkages between research and monitoring priorities and the MPA's objectives should be clarified; and that the use of geographic terms and references should be standardized.

Introduction

ASOC believes that the development of a Ross Sea Region Marine Protected Area (RSRMPA) Research and Monitoring Plan (RMP) is a critical task for CCAMLR this year. The workshop held in Rome was extremely productive and helped start the process of drafting the RMP. We thank the conveners and workshop participants for all of their hard work in developing the draft plan.

ASOC supports the implementation of the RSRMPA RMP. The RMP is a living document, and can and should change over time. Furthermore, it is crucial that the RMP can be understood by non-specialists, since it will be used by the Commission to evaluate the effectiveness of the RSRMPA. With this in mind, we have developed a number of recommendations for enhancing the RMP to ensure its effectiveness in the long-term.

To summarize our main suggestions:

- The importance of developing indicators and defining baselines and their importance should be highlighted more strongly, and baselines and indicators identified where possible in the RMP.
- The linkages between research and monitoring priorities and the MPA's overall objectives should be clarified.
- The use of geographic terms and references should be standardized.

The importance of defining baselines and developing measurable indicators

Given the importance of defining baselines and developing indicators in assessing the effectiveness of the RSRMPA, this section should be expanded upon and brought up higher in the RMP (currently it is housed under the "Implementation" section starting at paragraph 21). We feel this section should come closer to Table 1 so that it could be more directly tied to the research and monitoring topics. In addition, indicators should be measurable to properly monitor and evaluate their effectiveness.

According to best practices in MPA research and monitoring (see WS-RMP-17/05), establishing a baseline of marine ecosystem conditions against which future change can be measured is one of the most essential initial steps. Further, Annex C of CM 91-05 requires the establishment of baseline data. The current draft RMP notes the importance of baselines and that these can both be historical or modern, against which future change can be assessed. Ideally modern baseline data will be established in the first year of the MPA coming into force so that future research and monitoring can be measured against this baseline.

Annex C of CM 91-05 also notes that the RMP will have measurable criteria and indicators of the performance of the MPA. Thus, the development of relevant indicators is another essential initial step. We note that the current draft of the RMP includes a section on indicators in paragraph 26.

The indicators listed so far are a good start, but will need to be enhanced over time. Currently there are many indicators that could be assessed given the extensive list of research topics and optimised

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to deliver scientific knowledge sufficient to allow the Scientific Committee to advise the Commission on the achievement of MPA objectives. Therefore this section needs more clarity and expansion.

It is worth elaborating in the RMP how to measure these indicators and the ideal timelines for doing so (linking back to what baseline scientists are expected to measure).

The selection of indicators also needs to consider the feasibility of conducting research and monitoring over large areas within the required timelines.

Without clear, measurable indicators and baselines, SC-CAMLR and the Commission will have difficulty in assessing whether or not the RSRMPA has met its objectives.

Priorities for research and monitoring

It is important to indicate priorities, where they exist, for research and monitoring, and how they relate to the objectives specified in the CM, so that over time the Commission can more effectively evaluate MPA performance.

The current draft RMP contains a number of tables and figures that summarize information about research topics, objectives and geographic areas. While we believe tables are useful and necessary to clarify the information, the current versions of the tables do not accomplish that goal.

The CM (specifically Annex C) contains a number of ways of organizing information. First, there are four questions which research and monitoring should seek to answer. Next, MPA objectives fall into three categories – representativeness, threat mitigation, and scientific reference areas – and research should also seek to address these categories. Thus, there are multiple aspects that the Commission will consider when it evaluates the effectiveness of the MPA.

The RMP tables are linked to these elements of the CM, but could be improved by adding elements to some tables, and eliminating some tables or including them as appendices. With respect to Table 1, we agree with the change from “priorities” to “topics”. While this table is relatively clear, we would suggest removing the numbers of the relevant priority elements in parentheses and instead including these in a separate table in an appendix. We also suggest adding a columns on objective category and specific objectives to Table 1 that would indicate which of the three categories described in Annex 91-05/C, paragraph 2 each topic falls under and which specific objectives from Annex 91-05/B each topic will fulfill (see example rows below). The reasons for this are detailed further in the next paragraph.

If an objectives column or columns were added to Table 1 as suggested above, this would sufficiently link the main categories of objectives to research topics in this summary section. It may be advisable to list the three objectives categories here as well, while detailing the full objectives from Annex 91-05/B in an appendix. Those interested in examining the linkages between objectives, geographic locations, and research topics could then look at this in more detail.

With respect to Table 2, the level of detail in this table is confusing and it may be more appropriate to move it to an appendix, rather than have it in the main body of the text. Alternatively, the table could be included in the information that the Secretariat will annually post online without needing to be in the actual RMP.

Sample Table 1 with additional information on objectives.

ID	Research and monitoring topics	Questions identified in CM 91-05/C, paragraph 1	Objective category (representativeness, threat mitigation, or scientific reference areas)	Specific objectives (from Annex 91-05/B)
Topics that are relevant to the entire RSR				
1	Bioregionalisation and mapping biodiversity	(i)–(iv)	Representativeness	(i), (iv), (v) through (x), and (x)

ASOC also thinks it could be useful to include a diagram or flow chart explaining how the research and monitoring program will work in practice, using Conservation Measure 91-05 as a guide.

The need to clarify and standardize use of geographic terms and names.

One area that generates confusion is that there are multiple terms used for the different regions in the RSRMPA in both the Conservation Measure (CM) and the draft Research and Monitoring Plan (RMP) – these include regional terms (example: Northern Ross Sea), zone terms (example: GPZ) and feature names (example: Scott Seamounts). There are logical reasons to use different terms at different times, however, this means that different tables and sections of the RMP are not consistent in their geographical terminology. Annexes B and C of the CM also use different geographical terms.

Table 1 in Annex B of the CM (overall a useful table) sets out which geographic locations/features are in each “zone” and then details which objectives of the MPA apply to each. There are seven geographic locations listed: Balleny Islands and vicinity, continental shelf, continental slope, Eastern Ross Sea, Seamounts associated with Pacific Antarctic Ridge, Scott Seamount, and northwestern Ross Sea region.

Annex C clearly states, however, that the Research and Monitoring Plan will be organized geographically into the following five regions: Ross Sea continental shelf, Ross Sea continental slope, Balleny Islands and vicinity, northern Ross Sea region and seamounts, and northwestern Ross Sea region.

The inconsistency carries over into the draft RMP. Table 1 of the draft RMP uses a mix of zones and Annex C terminology. Table 2 uses zones and the geographic names in Annex B. Table 3 uses Annex C terminology.

We suggest that to be consistent, the document should be revised so that Annex C terminology is used throughout the RMP, as specified in the CM. Even if reference to the Scott Seamounts is made, it should be clear that this is part of the northern Ross Sea region and seamounts. Those actively doing research in the Ross Sea may not be confused by these variations, but all Members of the Commission must be able to understand the RMP to be able to determine if its objectives are being met. It makes the most sense to use the terms specified in Annex C of CM 91-05, which is the official document.

Conclusion and Recommendations

ASOC supports the RSRMPA RMP, and looks forward to its implementation. However, the RMP is a living document, and should be continually updated. ASOC therefore recommends the following:

- The importance of developing indicators and defining baselines and their importance should be highlighted more strongly, and baselines and indicators identified where possible in the RMP.
- The linkages between research and monitoring priorities and the MPA’s overall objectives should be clarified.
- The use of geographic terms and references should be standardized.