# Sustainable Destination Award Good Practice Story

## Azores' Marine Park

The Azores have been pioneer on the creation of the first Marine Park in the Atlantic Ocean.

The awareness of marine ecosystem degradation has been spread worldwide since 1980s. It was marked with the establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Portugal is one of pioneer nations who start this initiative. The existing MPAs did not have coherence and territorial integration to organize and integrate these protected areas not only MPAs, but also NATURA 2000 and OSPAR MPAs. OSPAR is the mechanism by which 15 Governments & the EU cooperate to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic. The Government of the Azores has been pioneer in the creation of the first Marine Park on the Atlantic Ocean outside its territorial sea, with 11 OSPAR Marine Protected Areas. Moreover last year (2016) it approved an extension of this Marine Park with the classification of 6 new marine protected areas. Its area of protection includes now 17 Marine Protected Areas, like the submarine archipelago Great Meteor, Princess Alice Bank or Condor Seamount. A new model or integrated regulation was established as the result of implementation scientific knowledge that ecosystem functions are interconnected. It is being implemented by working group on MPAs towards MPA network aiming national level. The Marine Park of the Azores is the main instrument of conservation for the MPAs beyond the territorial waters (12nm). Besides the 33 Marine Protected Areas inside the 12NM zone and 20 Natura 2000 marine areas, oceanic habitats are also being protected, that encompass important deep sea hydrothermal vents and seamounts, including 11 OSPAR areas outside the Azores Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) but under management by the Azores authorities according to the OSPAR management zonation. Those areas total 10.646.432 ha of protected marine habitats. With the extension of the EEZ the OSPAR areas outside the current EEZ will be included in the new EEZ delimitation, which will allow for further protection than just that provided under the OSPAR convention. The successful and effectiveness of coherent network of MPAs has led the Azores to influence a non-trawling policy implemented by the EU to establish several seamount MPAs within it EEZ and to promote the establishment of high seas MPAs protecting large seamount areas under international agreement.

Challenges

- Political and Administrative Problems

The governance system of Azorean MPAs are not only vertically fragmented such as EU, national, regional, and local levels of government, but also horizontally fragmented refer to different

administrative departments in marine issues. The problem and conflict are emerged from different vision and strategies in managing fisheries and environmental protection. Sometimes it caused overly bureaucratic administrative systems and lead to little political will to implement as too many stakeholder and governance layer in the system.

● Legal Problems There is lack of legal assignment or support on management plans which caused no enforcement for stakeholder/interagency cooperation to implement the plan.

● Economic Problems

As the influence of EU regulation to assure the protection of vulnerable ecosystems, this regulation affects fisheries by reducing the available fishing grounds. Another problem related to Azorean economy is marine transport. The Azorean are rely on marine transport to import / export activities and transportation of local and tourists. However, marine transports can result in sporadic incidents such as oil pollution, collision with marine mamals.

● Social Problems

Compliance with regulations amongst Azorean recreational fishers is low, which is a threat to MPA success.

● Environmental Problems

Invasive species represent a distinct threat to the isolated Azorean marine ecosystems. For example, in < 10 years the invasive algae Caulerpa Webbiana has caused major benthic landscape disruptions in coastal areas of Faial Island, some inside MPA.

● Technology and Research

There is a worldwide critical need for research that bridges the knowledge gap on the functioning of marine communities and reserves. The Azores is no exception. Four reasons converge to explain this challenge. Firstly, the complexities of marine systems almost preclude us from drawing general conclusions about the benefits of MPAs and the best processes to achieve their goals. Secondly, even though fairly substantiated rules of thumb can be adopted when designing MPA networks, differences between local systems inevitably prompt the need for local baseline reference points and ecological indices. Thirdly, another common shortfall in the Azores is the limited reference to social sciences in MPA establishment. Lastly, there has been a prior absence of interdisciplinary research.

The importance of adequate financing across the MPA process is one lesson from the Azores. General political support and engagement of the scientific community have been a characteristic of

the Azorean case study across its three decades, ultimately enabling the region to engage in the MPA experience. From the point of view of the MPA network definition, achieving representativeness is a major challenge in highly fragmented and diverse systems typified by islands states. In the Azores, reaching such a goal has arguably been the hardest caveat within a system that encompasses nine inhabited islands, a variety of habitats from coastal reefs to deep-water hydrothermal vents to dynamic multispecies pelagic hotspots, and different fisheries coexisting with other extractive and non-extractive activities. Yet, reaching current level of legal representativeness has been a very long process requiring multiple steps, sometimes even undoing what had been done (e.g., legislative actions).