

Section 4

Designation Levels: International, Regional & National



Designation Levels

MPA Management Training Curriculum | 2026
Module 1.2 - Introduction to MPAs and OECMs

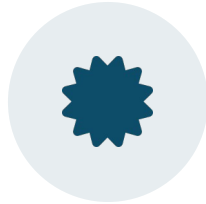


Learning Objectives



Differentiate Levels

Distinguish between international, regional, and national designation levels and their roles.



Identify Criteria

Identify core criteria for major designations like World Heritage and Ramsar Sites.



Regional Agreements

Explain the role of regional frameworks, specifically the SPAW Protocol in the Caribbean.



National Foundation

Analyze how national legislation serves as the primary legal backbone for protection.

International Designations

Global recognition overlays that enhance national protection efforts through international prestige and monitoring.

These designations connect local sites to a worldwide network of conservation excellence.



UNESCO World Heritage Sites



Outstanding Universal Value

Designated for cultural or natural significance so exceptional it transcends national boundaries.



Ecosystem Processes

Represents significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution of marine ecosystems.



Biodiversity Habitats

Contains the most significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity.



World Heritage Recognition

Global prestige bringing international monitoring and support

Ramsar Sites

International Designation

"Wetlands of International Importance designated under the Ramsar Convention."



Global Importance

Recognized specifically for significant wetland value.



Key Habitats

Focus on mangroves, seagrasses, and coastal zones.



Wise Use

Promotes conservation alongside sustainable use.



 Caribbean Mangrove & Seagrass Wetland

Man and Biosphere (MAB) Reserves



Sustainable Coexistence

Sites that promote solutions reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use, fostering a balanced relationship between people and nature.



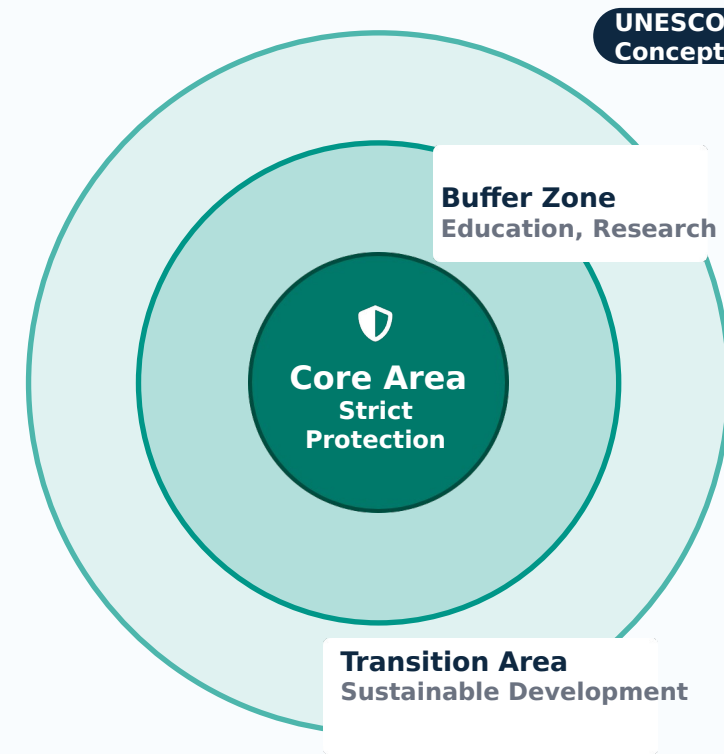
Zonation System

Typically features three interconnected zones: a strictly protected Core Area, a Buffer Zone for compatible activities, and a Transition Area for sustainable development.



UNESCO Designation

Intergovernmental scientific program launched in 1971. MAB reserves are designated by the International Coordinating Council of the MAB Programme.



The three-zone structure integrates conservation functions with development and logistic support.

Regional Designations

Collaborative Protection

SPAW Protocol

Regional Framework

The Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW) Protocol is the only legally binding regional environmental treaty for the Wider Caribbean.

Ecosystem-Based Standards

Establishes rigorous criteria for managing protected areas based on ecosystem health rather than just boundaries.

Cross-Border Cooperation

Facilitates international collaboration to protect migratory species like sea turtles, whales, and sharks across national borders.



National Designations

The Legal Foundation of Marine Protection



Primary Legal Backbone

National laws provide the essential "teeth" for enforcement. While international recognitions add prestige, national legislation defines allowed activities, prohibitions, and management authority.

National Legal Framework



Acts of Parliament & Decrees

Established through formal legislative processes or executive orders, providing the highest level of domestic legal authority for marine protection.



Enforcement "Teeth"

Unlike international recognitions which are often advisory, national laws provide the mechanism to prosecute violations, issue fines, and deploy patrols.



Defining Activities

Explicitly codifies what is **allowed** (e.g., catch-and-release fishing, research) and strictly **prohibited** (e.g., industrial dredging, anchoring on reefs).



Foundation of Protection

National legislation serves as the primary legal backbone upon which regional and international designations are layered.

Common National Titles



Marine Park

Large natural areas managed for ecosystem protection as well as recreational, educational, and scientific opportunities. Often allow regulated tourism and sustainable use.

Example: Bonaire National Marine Park



Wildlife Sanctuary

Areas managed specifically to protect particular species or habitats. Often requires active management interventions to maintain favorable conditions for target species.

Focus: Species-specific conservation



Nature Reserve

Strictly protected areas set aside primarily for science or wilderness protection. Human visitation is often limited or strictly controlled to minimize disturbance.

Focus: Preservation of pristine state



National Marine Monument

Designated to protect marine areas of historic, cultural, or scientific interest. Can cover vast ocean areas and typically offer strong protection levels.

Example: Papahānaumokuākea (USA)

Layers of Protection

How designations stack to strengthen conservation



Layers of Protection: How Designations Stack

Level	Example	Primary Focus
 International	UNESCO World Heritage / Ramsar Site	Global Heritage & Universal Value
 Regional	SPAW-Listed MPA (Caribbean)	Regional Connectivity & Shared Species
 National	Marine Reserve / National Park	Specific Local Management

Caribbean Case Study

Multi-level designation in action



Exploring how National, Regional, and
International designations stack to strengthen
protection

Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve

Triple Designation Case Study

"Origin of the Sky" - A premier example of multi-level marine protection in the Caribbean.



National Level

Mexican Biosphere Reserve established by presidential decree.



International (UNESCO)

Designated World Heritage Site (1987) for outstanding universal value.



International (Ramsar)

Recognized Wetland of International Importance.



Sian Ka'an: Diverse coastal landscape with mangroves and reefs

Key Takeaways



Three Designation Levels

Marine protection operates on **International** (global heritage), **Regional** (shared ecosystems), and **National** (legal authority) levels.



Prestige vs. Enforcement

International designations (UNESCO, Ramsar) add global **prestige** and monitoring but rely on national laws for actual **enforcement**.



The Legal Backbone

National legislation is the primary mechanism that gives MPAs legal "teeth" to prohibit harmful activities and manage resources.



Stacked Protection

Multiple designations (e.g., Sian Ka'an) strengthen protection by layering national authority with international oversight and funding opportunities.

Further Reading and Resources



International Designations

UNESCO World Heritage

Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (Criteria vii-x for natural sites).

Ramsar Convention

The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024: Conserving wetlands of international importance.



Regional Agreements

SPAW Protocol

Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife in the Wider Caribbean Region.

Cartagena Convention

Text of the Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment of the Wider Caribbean.



Case Studies

Sian Ka'an Biosphere

UNESCO World Heritage Centre profile: Sian Ka'an - Origin of the Sky.

Management Plans

Comparative analysis of management effectiveness in multi-designated protected areas.