

Ascension Island Marine Protected Area

Management Plan Summary

2021-2026

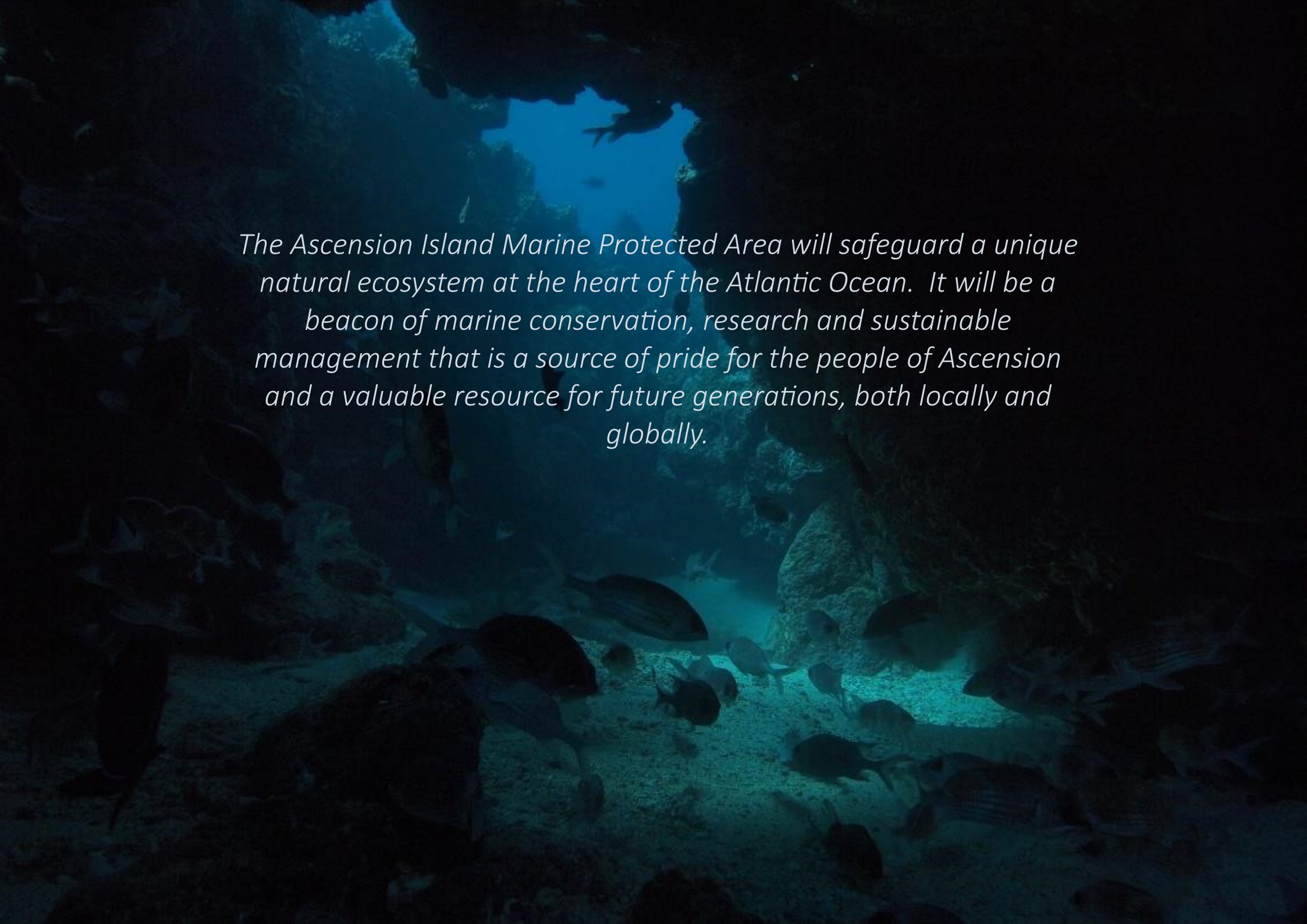




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An underwater photograph showing a school of fish swimming in a dimly lit environment. In the upper center, there is a bright opening in a rocky structure, possibly a cave or a crevice, through which light is streaming. The fish are silhouetted against the darker background, and the overall color palette is dominated by deep blues and greys, with a bright cyan light source from the opening above.

The Ascension Island Marine Protected Area will safeguard a unique natural ecosystem at the heart of the Atlantic Ocean. It will be a beacon of marine conservation, research and sustainable management that is a source of pride for the people of Ascension and a valuable resource for future generations, both locally and globally.

Introduction to the Ascension Island Marine Protected Area

The Ascension Island Marine Protected Area (MPA) was designated in August 2019. It covers the entirety of Ascension's 445,000km² Exclusive Economic Zone at the centre of the Atlantic Ocean. The MPA is surrounded by international waters that receive little regulation, making it a haven of protection for the abundant and unique marine biodiversity found around the island.

The ocean around Ascension is a special place. It has been little affected by human activity and the large fish and other top predators lost in so many parts of our oceans are still seen in abundance around the island. We have many marine species that are found nowhere else on earth, as well as globally important populations of breeding turtles and



seabirds. This abundance of life flows from the near-pristine nature of the seas around Ascension, and it is these whole ecosystems and the natural processes that sustain them, rather than individual features or species, that the MPA will seek to protect.

The Ascension Island MPA is an example to the rest of the world of what all of our oceans should and could look like in the future.

As well as safeguarding the marine environment, the MPA will also seek to preserve and strengthen the deep connection between the island community and the ocean. The history, prosperity and identity of Ascension and its people are bound to the surrounding ocean and the MPA will seek to generate social and economic benefits for those living on the island.

Ascension's MPA is one of a network of marine management areas established around the UK Overseas Territories and their dependencies as part of the UK Government's Blue Belt Programme. This programme has resulted in the long-term protection of over 4 million km² of ocean and contributed to the UK Government's wider aspiration of including 30% of the world's oceans within MPAs by 2030.

What will the MPA Achieve? - The MPA objectives

The MPA has three overarching, strategic objectives that capture its values and are designed to last for 20-25 years:

1. To conserve Ascension Island's marine biodiversity, habitats and ecological functions for long-term ecosystem health

This goes to the fundamental purpose of the MPA. Ascension has a wealth of marine life and we want to ensure it is protected and thrives for generations to come.

2. To promote the sustainable development and management of socio-economic activities that are compatible with protection of the marine environment

The marine environment is one of Ascension's greatest assets and we want the island to realise the benefits of this in ways that don't compromise the prosperity and enjoyment of future generations

3. To promote scientific research and share knowledge about Ascension Island's marine biodiversity in order to encourage support for marine conservation locally and internationally

Ascension's marine environment is globally important and we want to share this resource with researchers and the public to increase our understanding and appreciation of the world's oceans.

In order to deliver these, we also have a supporting objective:

4. To achieve effective governance and management of the MPA that is transparent and underpinned by sustainable financial and human resources

The potential benefits of the MPA to biodiversity, the people of Ascension and the wider global community will only be achieved if it is well-managed with the resources and oversight required.

We have broken each strategic objective down into 21 more detailed operational objectives that define exactly what we aim to achieve and against which we can measure progress.



What is the MPA Protecting?

Habitats and Species

The vast scale of the Ascension Island MPA means it encompasses a great range of habitats from sandy beaches to the seafloor 4,000m below the ocean surface. The MPA seeks to protect all of these because they are connected and we must safeguard whole marine ecosystems, the natural processes that support them and their cultural importance in order to secure their long-term future. The waters around Ascension are a special place because those connections and processes are still intact; it is one of the few near-pristine areas left in our oceans.


There are unique species, rare species and globally-threatened habitats in the MPA, but the others are important too. This section provides an introduction to the marine biodiversity and cultural importance of the MPA by giving just a glimpse of the extraordinary diversity it contains.

Coastal habitats

Ascension Island is a precious speck of dry land in the middle of the ocean and the island's coastline is home to the second largest breeding population of green turtles in the Atlantic and over half a million nesting seabirds.


Shallow water habitats

A total of 133 species of fish have been recorded around Ascension with 11 species found nowhere else on earth and a further 17 species shared only with neighbouring St Helena.



Deep benthic habitats

The seafloor at 3000m depth is a strange and forbidding place. The Mid Atlantic Ridge cuts through the MPA creating a chain of hydrothermal vents that are home to unique and specialised creatures.



Pelagic habitats

The average depth of water within Ascension Island's MPA is 3300m, providing a vast volume of marine habitat that has seen little disturbance from humans. This is the realm of giant marlin and immense shoals of fast-moving tuna.



Seamount habitats

There are three shallow water seamounts in the Ascension MPA that support rich ecosystems including deep sea corals and a much higher abundance of plankton and large pelagic fish than the surrounding open ocean

What is the MPA Protecting?

Cultural Heritage

The sea is a constant presence in the lives of everyone living on Ascension, and so it is not surprising that it plays a crucial role in the identity and culture of the island. In interviews and questionnaires conducted in 2019, the majority of people surveyed named the sea and coast when asked to describe the 'essence' of Ascension. The sea, and in particular fishing, is closely bound to the identity of many people living on Ascension and the beaches and pier are important locations for social gatherings and community cohesion on the island.

The history of Ascension is also closely bound to the ocean. Ascension was discovered by a Portuguese sailor in 1501 and for the following centuries most visitors were mariners looking for safety and fresh meat. The sense of a remote outpost providing comfort to weary travellers continues to this day and there is a culture of helping those in need that has come to the aid of many merchant sailors and transatlantic yachtspeople in recent years.

Being a remote island in the middle of the ocean is Ascension's greatest challenge and its most valuable asset. The creation of the MPA and the opportunity it offers for research into marine ecosystems could be the next step in realising the potential of the island.





What is permitted within the MPA?

Ascension is a remote island with a population of around 800 people and overall the ocean around Ascension sees little human activity. For that reason, protection of the MPA required only a small number of activities to be prohibited or restricted through legislation. The activities that continue to take place within the MPA are governed by regulations or policies that ensure they do not damage the MPA. If new activities are proposed in the future, then we have the power to introduce further measures to ensure the MPA is protected.

Prohibited activities

Large-scale commercial fishing in any part of the MPA

Large-scale commercial fishing will be prohibited in all parts of the MPA. This will not affect the small boats based on Ascension that sell their catch on the island or licensed sports fishing companies all of which can operate within 12NM of the coast.

Fishing beyond 12NM of the island

No fishing other than licensed research fishing will be permitted within the MPA beyond 12NM of the island. This includes all types of fishing (commercial, sports and recreational), for all species using any type of gear. The no-fishing zone includes Ascension's three shallow water seamounts and a total area of 443,000km².

Mineral extraction

No mineral extraction will be permitted within the MPA. This includes deep sea mining activity, extraction of rocks and minerals from inshore waters and the removal of sand from beaches. The only exception will be the periodic dredging required to maintain access to Ascension's one pier.

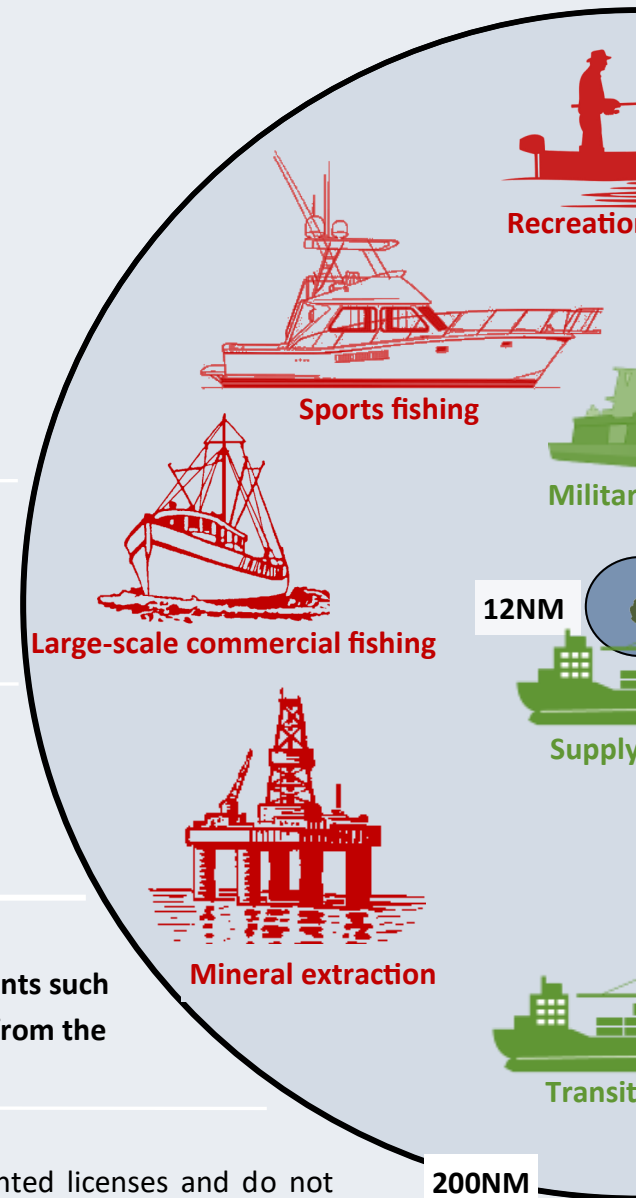
Restricted activities

Development within the MPA

There has been little historical development around Ascension's coast. **Any new developments such as the building of structures or the laying of pipes within the MPA will require permission from the Administrator following an Environmental Impact Assessment**

Discharge of waste and effluents

The three existing discharges into the MPA from desalination and wastewater treatment plants have been granted licenses and do not present a significant risk to the MPA. **Any new discharges will only be permitted if an Environmental Impact Assessment shows they will not damage the MPA.**



Permitted activities

Recreational fishing

Fishing is an important part of the local culture on Ascension and recreational fishing is allowed in the MPA within 12NM of the island. An Inshore Fisheries Advisory Committee made up of local fishermen and AIG Conservation staff has been established to develop an inshore fisheries management system.

Sports fishing

This fishery differs from the recreational one in that it is run on a commercial basis and the primary product is the experience of catching fish with species such as blue marlin commonly released after capture. Sports fishing will be allowed within 12NM of the island, but the business permit system and future inshore fisheries management will impose conditions on businesses to ensure they are sustainable.

Recreation and tourism

Swimming, snorkeling, SCUBA diving and wildlife watching are popular activities for people living on Ascension as well as for visitors. There is the potential to grow the tourism sector if the access to the island improves. Disturbance to protected species is already illegal and a proposed licensing system for ecotourism businesses would include conditions to minimise impacts on the MPA.

Supply of goods to the island

Sea freight is the principal means by which imports reach Ascension. This is a critical supply route for the island and will not be interrupted by the MPA. Regulations covering biosecurity and pollution control reduce the risk of supply vessels damaging the MPA.

Military activities

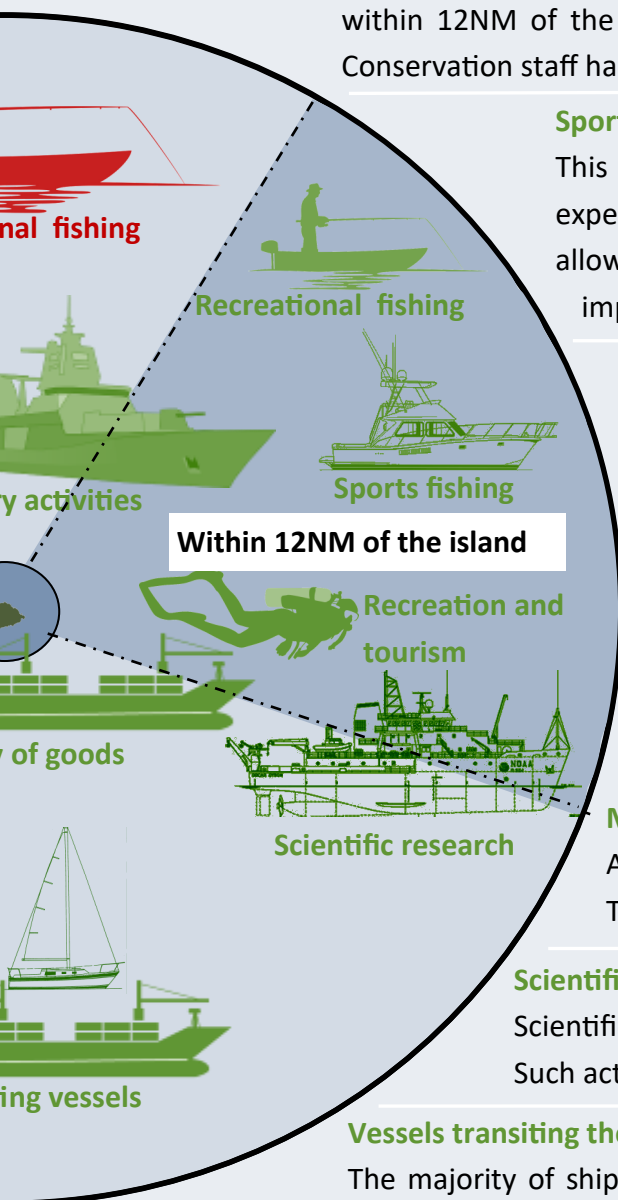
Ascension is a military island and both the United States Air Force and Royal Air Force have a presence on the island. The activities undertaken are not made public, but governing standards ensure environmental damage is avoided.

Scientific research

Scientific research is carried out in the waters around Ascension and this will be encouraged as an objective of the MPA. Such activities require a licence and conditions can be imposed to ensure there is no damage to the MPA.

Vessels transiting the MPA

The majority of ships in Ascension's waters are vessels transiting through the MPA that have nothing beyond radio contact with the island. Under the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) Ascension must allow vessels to pass through the MPA. We use satellites to track these vessels and any fishing vessels must stow their gear when transiting.





Threats to the MPA

The creation of the MPA and introduction of new regulations have provided a high degree of protection for Ascension's waters, but some threats still remain. The page opposite shows the results of a threat assessment, with the predicted significance of the threat reflected in the text size.

The effects of climate change (rising sea temperatures, shifts in ocean currents, ocean acidification and sea level rise) are the biggest threats and would affect both inshore and offshore areas of the MPA.

The next greatest threat is from the introduction of non-native species, though this threat is mainly confined to inshore habitats. Illegal fishing within the MPA and the Atlantic tuna fishery in international waters outside of it pose a threat to offshore ecosystems, while any failure to manage the recreational and sports fisheries properly could damage inshore ecosystems.

Many pressures that are significant in other parts of our oceans such as development, pollution discharges and noise pollution are assessed as being relatively low risk on Ascension.

IUU fishing in the MPA

Commercial fishing outside MPA

Recreational fishing

Sports fishing

Increased water temperatures

Shifts in ocean currents & upwellings

Ocean acidification

Sea level rise

Marine litter

Land-based sources of pollution

Spill incident

New non-natives

Existing non-natives

Disturbance from tourism

Development

Mineral extraction

(Development)

(Mineral extraction)

Governance of the MPA

Principles of governance

The Ascension Island MPA will be governed according to the following principles:

- **Evidence-based** - We will make all decisions on the best available information, and we will endeavour through the Monitoring, Research and Evaluation Strategy to address knowledge gaps and evaluate management effectiveness to improve the quality of our actions.

This will be achieved by monitoring the outcomes of our actions and applying an adaptive management approach that assesses both the success of implementation and progress against the MPA objectives.

- **Transparent** - We will share the information we have, the decisions we make and the processes by which we make them in a form that is accessible to the people of Ascension and the global community.

This will be achieved through the publication of the MPA Management Plan, annual workplans, monitoring data and effectiveness reviews as well as an active Public Engagement Strategy.

- **Accountable** - We welcome scrutiny and oversight of our decisions to ensure they are consistent with the objectives of the MPA.

This will be achieved through public consultation on the drafting and review of the MPA Management Plan and the requirement for the Management Plan and Annual workplan to be approved by elected members of the Ascension Island Council. The MPA Steering Group, Inshore Fisheries Advisory Committee and a Scientific Advisory Committee will provide oversight and ensure the MPA is achieving its objectives and following international best practice.

The role of the MPA Management Authority will be undertaken by the Ascension Island Government, principally through a dedicated team within its **Conservation and Fisheries Directorate**. External oversight and support will be provided by the elected members of the **Ascension Island Council**, the **MPA Steering Group**, **Inshore Fisheries Advisory Committee**, **MPA Youth Committee** an independent **Scientific Advisory Committee** and the UK Government's **Blue Belt Programme**.

Adoption of the MPA Management Plan after every five year review as well as any changes to the MPA legislation will require approval from the Governor of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha following a recommendation from the Ascension Island Council. Most core management activities will be delivered by staff based on Ascension. The exception is compliance and enforcement of offshore fisheries regulations, which will be undertaken by the Blue Belt Surveillance and Intelligence Management Hub (BBSIH) housed with the UK's Marine Management Organisation.

Governance Structure

The diagram on the right explains how the MPA will be managed by highlighting the key documents that will guide all management activity and identifying who will be involved in approving and reviewing those documents.

Ascension Island Council (AIC) - includes five or seven elected members who make formal recommendations to the Governor on policy matters.

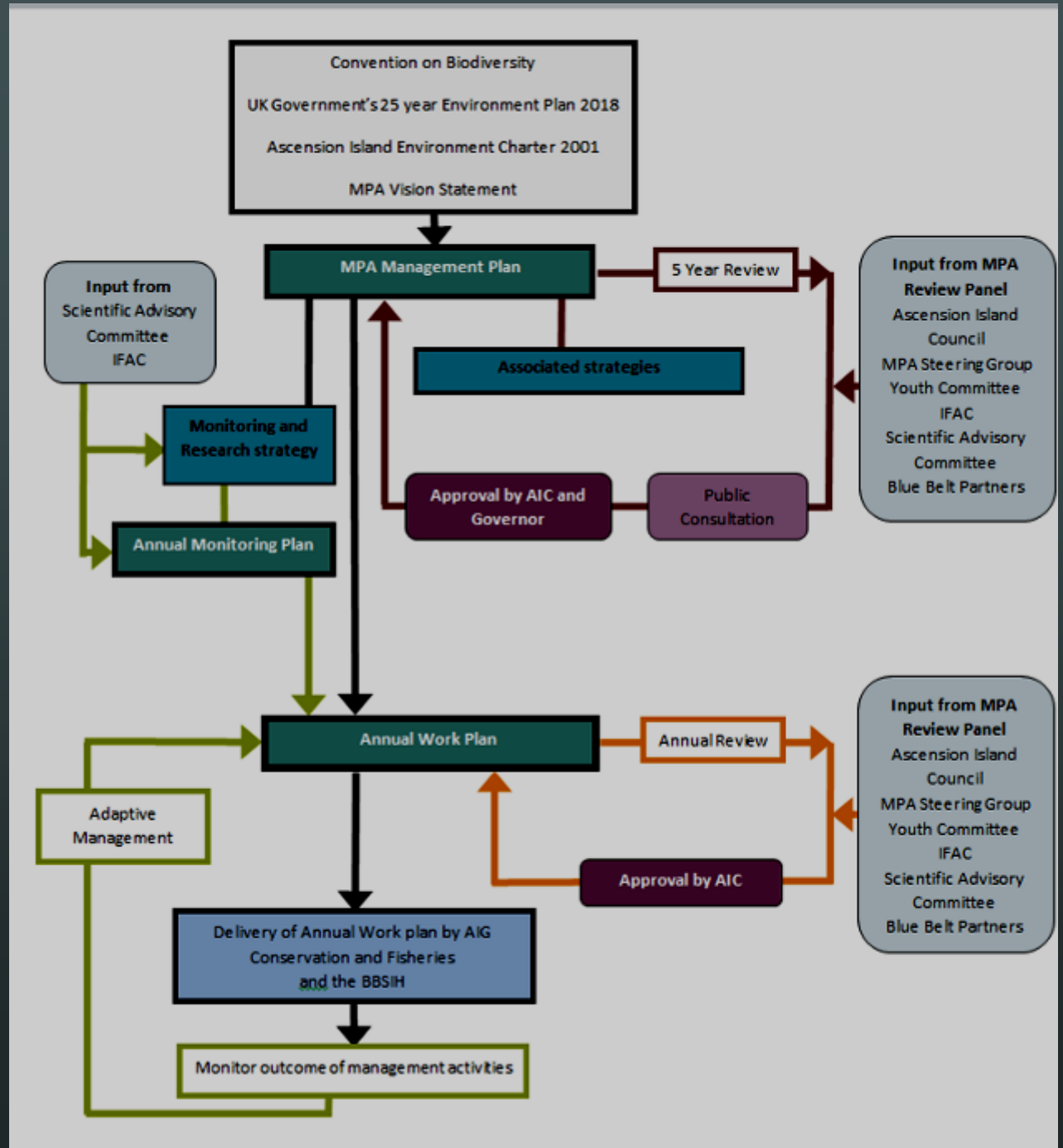
MPA Steering Group - made up of eight volunteers from the Ascension Island community.

MPA Youth Committee - made up of eight young people under 18 years of age who live on Ascension.

Inshore Fisheries Advisory Committee (IFAC)
- made up of volunteers from the Ascension fishing community.

Scientific Advisory Committee - made up of academics and experts with experience relevant to managing the MPA.

Blue Belt Partners - the UK's Marine Management Organisation and the Centre for Ecology, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science.



How we will manage the MPA

The actions that will be taken to achieve the objectives

The Ascension MPA is about doing things rather than just stopping things and so, whilst there are some actions to prevent or restrict damaging activities, there are many more aimed at restoring, improving, researching and publicising Ascension's amazing marine environment. It is possible to trace all the actions we do back through the objectives they deliver to understand how they contribute to the overall vision of the MPA.

The MPA is going to be around forever and it will be a long journey to achieve everything we want. In the first five years covered by this plan we have focused on the actions that will achieve the greatest positive change to the MPA within our resources. This means there are no actions linked to substantial threats such as ocean acidification and rising sea temperatures because we simply don't have the management tools to address them. Over the next five years we will encourage research and innovation to address these areas.

Strategic Objective 1 - To conserve Ascension Island's marine biodiversity, habitats and ecological functions for long-term ecosystem health

Actions:

- Prevent illegal offshore fishing using remote surveillance and enforcement
- Monitor new threats to the MPA objectives
- Regulate and manage inshore fisheries
- Implement Marine Pollution Control Plan
- Review Protected Areas legislation
- Recognise genetically distinct subspecies in legislation
- Control developments in the MPA
- Non-native species control
- Biosecurity controls
- Conduct regular litter clearance
- Restoration of turtle nesting beaches



Strategic Objective 2- To promote and manage the sustainable development of socio-economic activities that are compatible with protection of the marine environment

Actions:

- Tourism development strategy
- Business development support on Ascension
- Guidance and regulations for sports fishing and ecotourism

Strategic Objective 3 - To promote scientific research and share knowledge about Ascension Island's marine biodiversity in order to encourage support for marine conservation locally and internationally

Actions:

- Develop Ascension as a scientific research hub
- Ascension Island public engagement campaign
- Global public engagement campaign

Strategic Objective 4 - To achieve effective governance and management of the MPA that is transparent and underpinned by sustainable financial and human resources

Actions:

- Sustainable financing strategy
- Strengthen governance structures
- Effectively enforce regulations
- Data management system



Measuring the success of the MPA

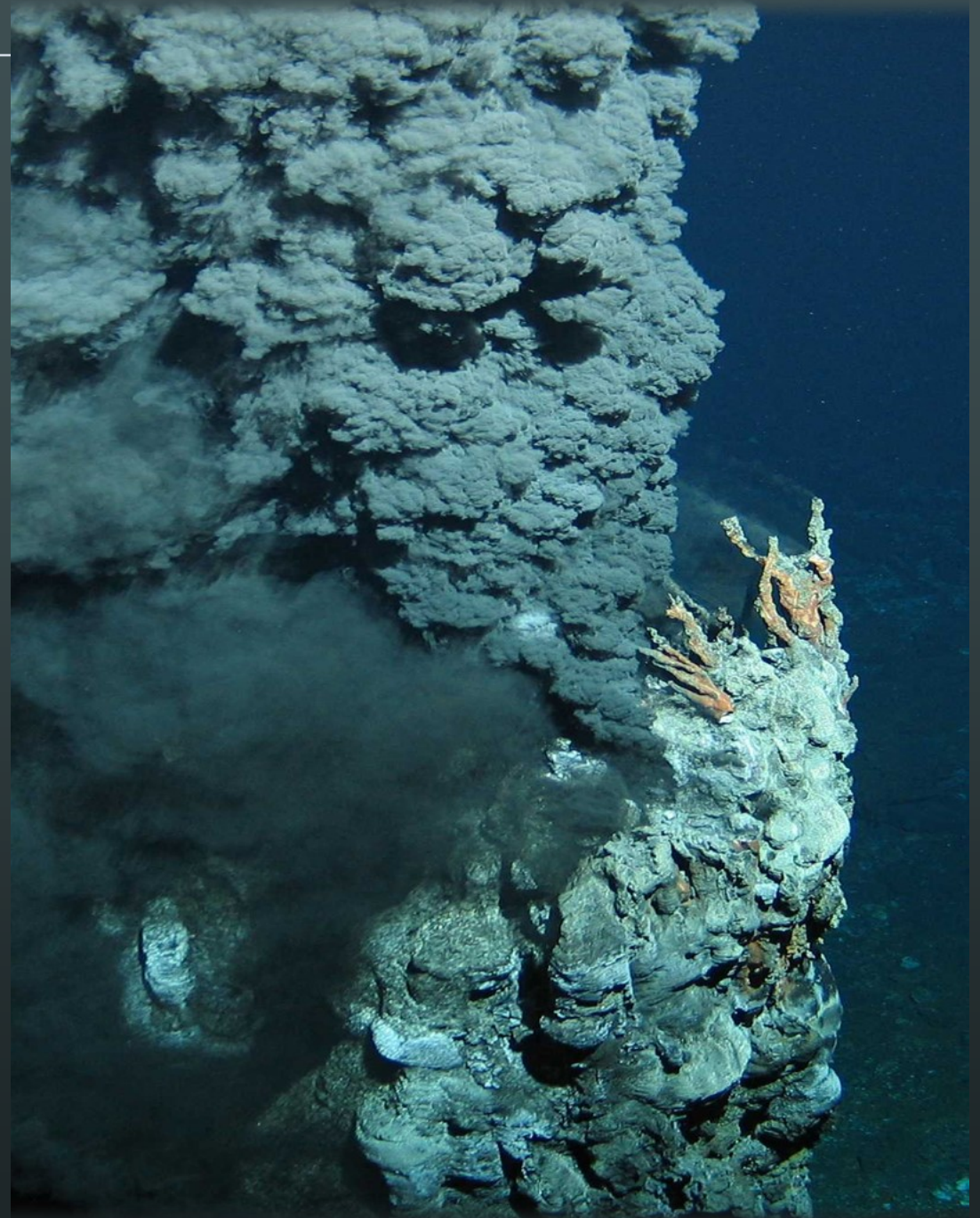
Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring, evaluation and research are so fundamental to the success of the MPA that we have dedicated an entire strategy to them. We need to be able to demonstrate to our funders, partners and supporters that we are making a difference and achieving our objectives, and we need to learn from experience and keep improving what we do through adaptive management.

Adaptive management loop



We will encourage external researchers to come to Ascension and advance our overall knowledge of the marine environment, but our work will be firmly focused on the information we need to make better management decisions. That requires not just a robust monitoring system embedded from the start, but also a strong evaluation process that encourages honest assessment and is prepared to alter the direction of management if necessary.



Below is a summary of the approach we will take to achieve this:

Management assessment - have planned actions been completed and outcomes achieved?

There are performance targets connected to all the management actions included in the MPA Management Plan. Attainment of the target will be recorded to demonstrate the actions have been accomplished.

Performance monitoring - are we achieving the MPA objectives?

All of the MPA's 21 operational objectives have metrics and targets associated with them by which progress towards achieving the objective can be measured. It is not currently possible to measure all the suggested metrics (particularly for pelagic and deep sea ecosystems) and initially there will be an emphasis on the metrics that can be measured, key indicator species/habitats and, where necessary, proxy objectives. A major focus of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Strategy will be to develop resource-efficient means of addressing the major gaps in recording the metrics.

This dual approach to monitoring is essential to distinguish success in delivering the management actions from success in meeting the objectives. If objectives are not being achieved then it is important to know whether greater effort is needed to complete the management actions, or whether the actions were delivered but weren't sufficient to achieve the objectives and need to be reviewed.

Progress Reporting

To balance the need for frequent evaluation against the need for management stability, we have adopted a model of an **Annual Progress Review** combined with a much more detailed and comprehensive **redrafting of the MPA Management Plan every five years**. The evaluation process will be transparent and involve external oversight to ensure it is rigorous and objective. The Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Strategy outlines the review process in more detail.

The evaluation of the MPA's performance will be of interest to a range of audiences and we will publish the results in formal reports, infographics and brief snap shots of progress for dissemination via social media. We want all the outputs from the evaluation to be accessible and compelling, such that anyone will quickly be able to see the areas that are working and those that need improvement.

The future of the MPA

Opportunities and threats faced by the MPA

Forever is a long time. The MPA designation is a commitment to provide permanent protection for the marine biodiversity around Ascension whatever the future holds. It is impossible to predict accurately all the changes that will come, but we have tried to scan the horizon for the major issues likely to affect the MPA. Some may be opportunities, others challenges.

- **Expansion of protection** - Could the MPA provide the foundation for coordinated protection of migratory species across the Atlantic?
- **Creation of a scientific hub** - Ascension is the perfect location from which to launch research into open ocean ecosystems and could attract large numbers of visiting scientists, expanding our knowledge and contributing to the island economy.
- **Using remote techniques for surveillance, enforcement and monitoring-** We need to be at the forefront of new technology to improve our management and stay ahead of illegal fishing vessels.
- **Climate change** - This is the greatest threat facing the MPA and we are only beginning to understand ways to make protected areas resilient to it.
- **Blue Carbon** - Understanding how our management of the oceans affects the rate at which they absorb and store carbon could be vital for tackling climate change and lead to a sustainable source of income to support MPA management.
- **The ‘Future of Ascension’ discussions** - These will determine the future governance and purpose of Ascension Island and the MPA needs to shape and adapt to the outcome.
- **Growth of the tourism sector** - This offers promise for growth of the island economy, but needs to be done sustainably to enhance not damage the MPA.
- **Securing funding and political support** - This will always be a challenge for the MPA, but the need to demonstrate results will also keep us striving for excellence.





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Many thanks to the generous people who contributed stunning photographs and paintings to this document.

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