Oceana's position on the status of Atlantic MPA Network for OSPAR ICG-MPA

International recommendations point out the necessity of creating a comprehensive and ideally global MPA network to ensure the conservation of marine habitats. States have collectively agreed to establish "equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of MPAs" following the CBD commitments especially under Aichi Target 11, which was further translated into North East Atlantic Environment Strategy fort the OSPAR region.

Big advances have been made so far and, at the end of 2012, the NE Atlantic MPA network had 132* sites designated as SCIs/SACs belonging to the Natura 2000 Network and 333 MPAs designated under OSPAR Commission (324 within CP national jurisdiction and 7 in ABJN/high seas). On the other hand, also from a biological point of view, the EBSA process has identified priority areas that should be submitted to CBD repository body and will guide the future implementation of the MPA Network. Cooperation with other competent Authorities for managing sectorial human activities, should also be taken into account including measures involving temporal and spatial restrictions and other fisheries management (e.g. NEAFC temporary closures), aiming to preserve and restore certain target species and Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs).

Some ecoregions have progressed faster than others, and today the existing MPA network is markedly uneven. In fact it is mainly concentrated along the coastal waters and the Mid Atlantic Ridge (MAR). However, important gaps exist since relevant underwater features are still unprotected (e.g. submarine structures made by leaking gases) and the deepest bathymetric layers are under-represented. This fact reflects main weaknesses regarding the target to reach an ecologically representative MPA network (see map).

Callorgorgia verticillata and *Asconema setubalense* at Gorringe Bank, Portugal © OCEANA

At first sight, the main aforementioned gaps can be appreciated in: the Arctic Basin, Greenland and Iceland territorial waters, Northern British Islands, the West European Basin, the area between Azores and Madeira and the Mid Atlantic Ridge and south from the Azores. However, by only considering the four EBSAs, the gaps would become more significant setting aside Pedro Nunes and Hugo de Lacerda Seamounts, North East Azores – Biscay Rise, Evlanov Seamount and West of Azores.

By using GIS and according to GEBCO, the occurrence of several underwater geological features is out of any potential protection (abyssal plains, deep channels, seamounts, etc.). Many of these features are under the OSPAR List of Threatened and/or Declining Species and Habitats. Furthermore, such features potentially support VMEs (hydrothermal vents, coral reefs, submarine structures made by leaking gases, etc.).

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that the inclusion of Macaronesian region -at least Portuguese and Spanish waters- could

also be considered under OSPAR maritime area. From the marine ecoregions of the world (MEOW) perspective, and bearing in mind a wider scope, this aspect should be taken into account to consolidate the real ecological coherence of the network.

Thus, the main considerations in order to complete a comprehensive MPA network for the NE Atlantic are as follows:

- The network is not well spatially distributed and consequently not ecologically coherent. This fact also prevents a well-connected system of MPAs.

- An adequate assessment of the ecological coherence of the network is still not possible due to the persistent lack of ecological data, which is also preventing the addition of valuable but isolated areas (mostly in high seas).

- EBSAs are a potential tool to achieve the coherence of the network, as they cover large areas situated mostly in ABNJ. However, further research is needed and several potential areas still need to be identified as EBSAs. .

- Certain MPAs have been designed covering just a specific bathymetric layer, involving protection only for benthic habitats or water column. This means that the real gaps are greater than revealed in the map.

- Besides the lack of detailed scientific information in the area, the existence of important underwater features is known (e.g.: Charcot, King's Trough, Jovellanos, Armoricain, Gorringe Bank, etc.). Although for some of them the occurrence of VMEs has been repeatedly documented, the Precautionary Principle should be applied to the others while further research is conducted.

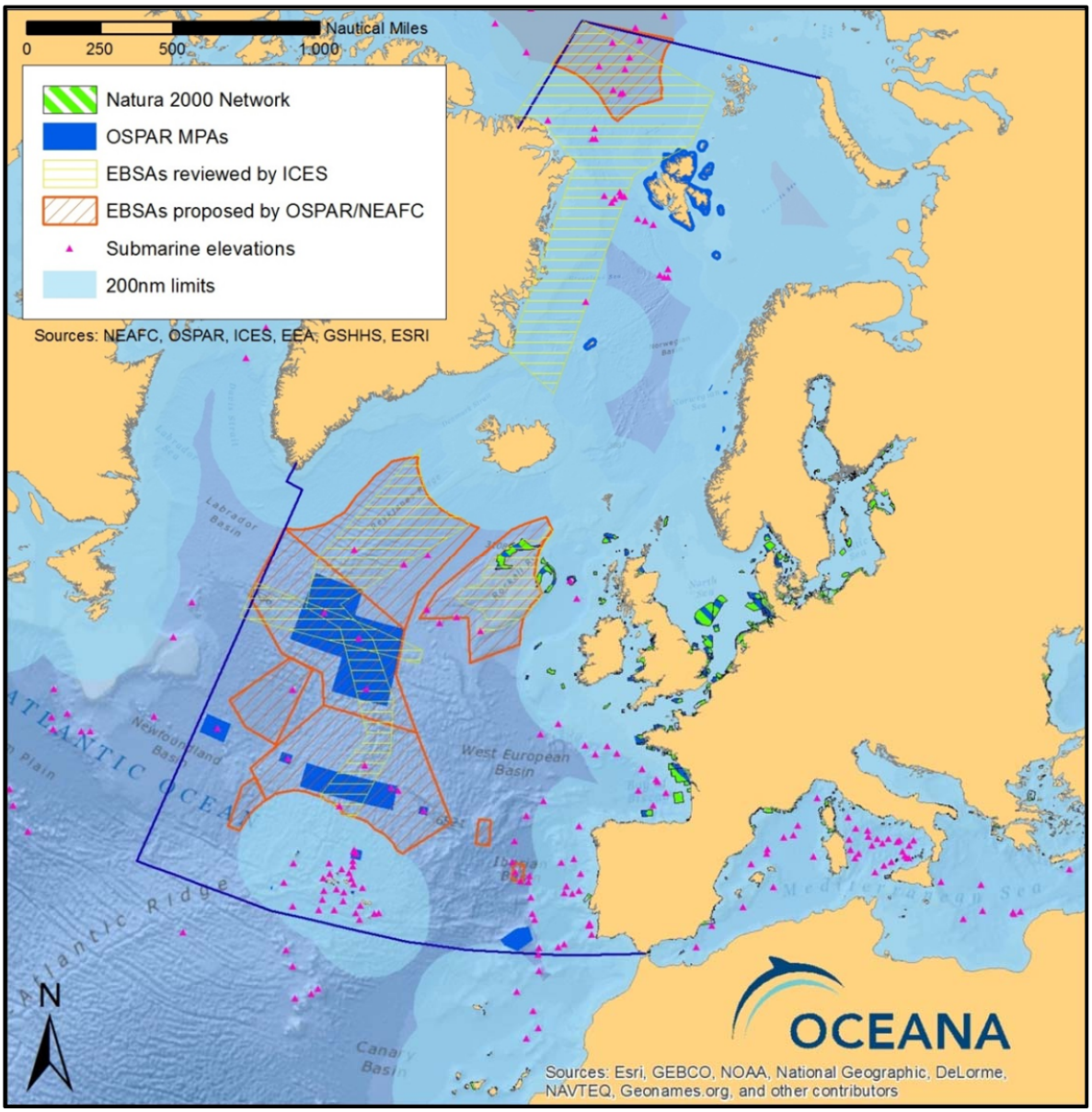
- The southward extension of the OSPAR area limit, specially addressed to include the Macaronesian region (Madeira and Canary Islands and their adjacent high seas) is recommended. It is crucial to promote the protection of their high ecological values and VMEs since many of them are considered under OSPAR List of Threatened and/or Declining Species and Habitats. Additionally, this would help to fill the existing gap and strengthen the ecological coherence of the network.

- There is still a high number of seamounts under no protection status that should be object of researching due to their high ecological value. In fact proper management measures are recommended to be developed in order to recover their associated communities and ensure their effective conservation

- Further research is indispensable in order to strengthen the network and therefore succeed in the ambitious objective of a global MPA network. In this regards, OSPAR Commission should be opened to recent findings, scientific information and knowledge on VMEs.

Oceana strongly encourages OSPAR Contracting Parties to consider adopting urgent measures through boosting new MPA designations to fill the gaps in the existing network and thus properly achieve the Target 11 under CBD for an ecologically representative and well-connected system of MPAs in the Northeast Atlantic region by 2020.

Marine Protected Areas conforming the NE Atlantic MPA Network. Priority areas considered under the EBSAs process and submarine elevations have been also included to spatially identify main gaps.



* Note that calculations have been made using last Natura 2000 dataset updated (end 2012) and only considering those SCI and SCA with marine surface > 5%