

# Marine Protected Areas

## Malaysia – Two MPA Candidates for the Green List

*"By giving recognition to well-managed and well-governed protected and conserved areas, the IUCN Green List aims to increase the number of areas delivering long-lasting conservation results for people and nature."*

Dr Agnes Agama, Malaysia's Expert Assessment Group for the Green List<sup>1</sup>



### Summary

The International Union for Conservation of Nature Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas is a global standard of best practice for area-based conservation, covering all forms of protected and conserved areas. It is a certification programme that recognises effectively managed and fairly governed terrestrial and marine protected and conserved areas that are achieving their conservation outcomes. These areas include marine and terrestrial protected areas, natural World Heritage sites, indigenous peoples' and community conserved areas, and wildlife sanctuaries, among others. The Green List

Participants at Green List workshop in Malaysia, 2019

standard has criteria for good governance, sound design and planning, and effective management that underpin a fourth fundamental component: positive conservation outcomes. Several marine protected areas (MPAs) have now achieved Green List status and many others are registered as candidates.

This case study describes the programme and illustrates how two MPAs in Malaysia are applying for Green List status.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wwf.org.my/?26645/The-Malaysian-Standard-for-the-IUCN-Green-List-of-Protected-and-Conserved-Areas-Launched>





Corals, Tun Mustapha Park Photo: WWF Malaysia

## The issue

Expansion of the global system of protected and conserved areas to secure the most important areas for biodiversity conservation will be successful only if these areas are well governed and managed and deliver positive outcomes for biodiversity and for society. However, protected areas, whether marine or terrestrial, find it a major challenge to achieve conservation outcomes and meet a site's objectives while also implementing fair and equitable management of human activities.

As is widely recognised in the business world, evaluation and assessment of performance is a key tool for improving management and ensuring success. Evaluation of protected areas is therefore increasingly undertaken using a range of assessment methods. However, the lack of an accepted standard for "good" governance and management has meant that assessors are often unsure exactly what expectations they should measure against. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List programme was set up in 2012 to develop an agreed global standard that can be used everywhere, for protected areas in both low-income and high-income countries and regardless of the extent of their financial resources (Hockings et al., 2019).

## The response

The IUCN Green List Standard is organised around four components — good governance, sound design and planning, effective management and successful conservation outcomes. Each component has a set of Criteria, each of which has indicators against which to measure achievement. A marine protected area (MPA) must be evaluated to achieve all Criteria, across all four components, in order to be accepted for the IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas.

Fundamental to the process are the Expert Assessment Groups for the Green List (EAGLs), which are composed of experts in protected area management who volunteer their time and are selected by the relevant Regional Vice-Chair of the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA). A site, or several sites, or the jurisdiction responsible for the sites, initially registers as a Green List candidate. The relevant EAGL then adapts the global Green List indicators to the local context, referring any suggested adaptations to the Green List Standards Committee for ratification. Managers of the protected areas that are applying then prepare evidence for five basic indicators, at which point the protected area becomes a Candidate Site.

Supported and assisted by the EAGL, the site managers then assemble the evidence required to assess the remaining indicators, and this, with supporting documentation, is uploaded onto the web-based portal

used to manage the Green List. Targeted consultations are then undertaken with key rights-holders and stakeholders, the method to be used for this having been approved by both the EAGL and an independent reviewer from the organisation Accreditation Services International (ASI); ASI provides mechanisms and procedures that assure independence and credibility of the decision-making processes.<sup>2</sup>

At least one member of the EAGL must visit the site to assess the operations and performance of the protected area, speak with staff and stakeholders, and view information not available electronically. EAGL members then meet to consider the application; site managers and the independent reviewer may attend the meeting to ensure proper processes are followed. The EAGL can either recommend the site for addition to the Green List or indicate to the site managers that additional work is needed to meet the Standard. EAGL recommendations, with a summary of site compliance and the report of the independent reviewer, are sent to the international Green List Committee, which takes the final decision on admitting the site to the Green List.

Successful sites are placed on the Green List for a period of five years, with a mid-term review (which involves a similar but slightly reduced process). For full relisting after five years, a site visit is required and further review. There is also a mechanism for stakeholders or the public to raise an alert if they feel that a site on the Green List has suffered from a material change in management effectiveness or in outcomes, and if necessary a site can be removed from the list. Information on the Green List process and Standard is available in the Green List User Manual.<sup>3</sup>

By 2020, the Green List programme was operating in 40 countries (including several Commonwealth countries, such as Australia, Kenya, Malaysia and Tanzania), with 46 sites in 14 countries admitted to the Green List. Eight sites on the Green List are MPAs, and there are some 15 candidate MPAs, as well as the entire California MPA network, which has registered as an entity and will provide the first test of how a protected area network can be Green Listed. The Seychelles has also expressed interest and the IUCN Green List staff organised an initial workshop in June 2020 to introduce the concept to relevant national protected area experts and organisations in this country.

Malaysia is the first of the Commonwealth countries involved in the Green List programme to register MPAs as candidates. The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia took on the role of the implementing partner and a Malaysian EAGL was established in October 2017. The EAGL adapted the global Green List Standard to the Malaysian context, and the IUCN Green List Committee approved this in 2019; the national standard is now available in Bahasa Malaysia as well as English. The EAGL asked protected areas in Malaysia if they would be interested in participating and five agreed to do so: three terrestrial protected areas and two MPAs:

- **Tun Mustapha Park (TMP)** at the northern tip of Sabah covers 8,988 km<sup>2</sup> and was designated in 2016 to protect mangroves, sea grass beds, coral reefs, whale sharks, marine turtles, dugong and associated marine biodiversity.<sup>4</sup> As the first multiple-use MPA in Malaysia, its establishment involved a 13-year participatory and consultative process facilitated by WWF Malaysia and Sabah Parks (the responsible management agency), critically important as the MPA provides livelihoods for over 80,000 coastal inhabitants (Boey et al., 2019). Sabah Parks and WWF Malaysia signed a 10-year memorandum of understanding in 2017, which covers technical and funding support for the implementation of the TMP Integrated Management Plan and which was approved in 2018.
- **The Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area (SIMCA)** was designated in 2001 following an approach to the government by the owners of the Lankayan Island Dive Resort (LIDR), who realised there was a need to halt illegal and destructive fishing in the surrounding waters and to protect the environmental integrity of the island. SIMCA is co-managed by the Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD) and a private company, Reef Guardian, covers 463 km<sup>2</sup> and includes three islands and the surrounding waters, with shallow coastal reefs and sea grass beds (Teh et al., 2008). Visitors to LIDR are charged a fee, which generates funding for management. The SWD trains and certifies Reef Guardian staff as Honorary Wildlife Wardens, and occasionally participates in sea patrols to enforce SIMCA boundaries and prevent illegal fishing and turtle egg poaching.

To introduce stakeholders and staff from the five protected areas to the Green List process, a three-day workshop was held in 2019, attended by representatives of relevant government agencies, WWF Malaysia, IUCN and other linked organisations, along with some of the EAGL members. The participants were given an

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2 <https://www.asi-assurance.org/s/post/a1J1H000002JeDTUA0/p0136>

3 <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/ourwork/iucn-green-list-protected-and-conserved-areas/user-manual>

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4 <http://www.sabahparks.org.my/index.php/the-parks/tun-mustapha-park-newly-gazetted>





Sugud Marine Islands Conservation Area, Malaysia. Photo by: Fungchen Chung

overview of tools and approaches that can help with implementation of the Standard, including governance methodologies, sound design and planning tools, and management effectiveness methodologies. Workshop participants conducted an initial self-assessment of site performance against the Green List Standard criteria.

## Partnerships and support

WWF Malaysia is the implementing partner for the Green List candidature process for both terrestrial and marine protected areas; achieving Green List status for TMP is a specific target under the memorandum of understanding between WWF Malaysia and Sabah Parks for implementation of the TMP Integrated Management Plan. Support is also provided through Blue Communities, a four-year programme funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund, which supports research aimed at management of marine ecosystems in four sites in Southeast Asia; the University of Malaya undertakes research in TMP. The Asia Protected Areas Partnership and the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Korea also provide support.

SIMCA has no external funding to support its Green List candidature, and is using revenue generated by tourism and other fundraising activities within the MPA. Existing

technical capacity within Reef Guardian is being used to support the application process. IUCN is also assisting both sites.

IUCN estimates that it costs about US\$10,000 to evaluate three to five protected areas for the Green List, with half of this financing the operation of the EAGL and half funding the work of the independent reviewer. The cost of site visits, staff time for compiling evidence and other involvement of protected area staff is generally met by the management agency.

## Results, accomplishments and outcomes

Currently, the sites are preparing the necessary documentation to submit to the EAGL. It will be some time before the sites go through the final certification (Green Listing can take two to three years), but as, explained in the section below on lessons learnt, the process itself has valuable outcomes in terms of building staff capacity, ensuring the management plan is fit for purpose and developing the necessary monitoring programmes, documentation processes and financial plans.

## Challenges

**COVID-19: The greatest current environmental challenge in Malaysia, as in most countries, is recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. All countries and MPAs around the world have undergone a massive negative impact. With the cessation of tourism, many sources of income have dried up. MPA managers have had to focus on ensuring the safety and security of their staff. Reduced visitor numbers and disrupted supply chains for fishery products have significantly affected the livelihoods of local communities that may normally both depend on and help manage MPAs. The impact on fishing communities has been documented for TMP (Jomitol et al., 2020). MPA management is focusing down on core operations to maintain basic functioning. However, there is consensus that effectively managed MPAs will be more resilient and that a sustainable managed ocean, encompassing MPA networks of adequate size, will be an essential component of recovery.**

A review of the MPAs that participated in the Green List pilot phase (Wells et al., 2016), the experiences of those that have registered more recently and the Malaysia Green List workshop mean that the main challenges in the Green List process are beginning to be well understood:

- The capacity, resources and funding for undertaking the assessment are not insignificant. Extensive data and information have to be assembled, collated and analysed, much of which may lie in dispersed sources. This work often falls to MPA managers and their staff, in addition to their normal duties. For example, at SIMCA, a major challenge is to gather past records of communications, meeting minutes and letters prior to the establishment of the MPA in 2001, but much of this is no longer available.
- Language and terminology may create obstacles, and the concepts involved are not always easily understood by different cultures. In particular, site staff must understand that the process is not an evaluation of individual performance but that it is aimed at helping authorities and overall management. This may require advance training and external support.
- Participants at the Malaysian workshop noted the following particular challenges: stakeholder engagement, funding, proving the legal basis of the site and obtaining data on social and economic impact. At TMP, a newly gazetted MPA, the

parks authority had to focus on getting the MPA operational at the same time as initiating the Green List candidature process, and the limited, relatively new staff, with limited knowledge and assessment experience, posed a challenge.

- There is general agreement among the sites involved to date, and in the public consultation on the Green List Standard, that a single unified approach is appropriate for all types of protected area, whether terrestrial or marine. Nevertheless, the fluidity and dynamic nature of marine ecosystems, which make MPAs particularly sensitive to events occurring outside their boundaries or globally (such as climate change), must be considered. For example, in Malaysia, future developments in the vicinity of TMP (e.g. potential silica mining, oil and gas extraction, port and harbour development) that are the remit of other government agencies could threaten the effective management of the MPA, if legislation and enforcement arrangements are not harmonised with the interests of TMP and marine biodiversity protection.
- When adapting the indicators, consideration must be given to measuring how well MPA management is integrated with wider efforts to sustain and restore the functioning of adjacent ecosystems and address upstream and downstream effects.

## Key lessons learnt

The MPAs that have participated in the Green List process have felt that it has led to a clear improvement in the processes involved in achieving effective management. The availability of a global standard against which sites can measure their performance means that all protected areas can start to put in place the necessary measures to improve their management effectiveness. Regular assessments and registration with the programme should be seen as a part and parcel of the development programme for any MPA, and government agencies and management bodies should be promoting this.

Initiating a regular programme of assessments of management effectiveness is an important first step.

Sites that have conducted such evaluations (e.g. using the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT)) will have a sound basis of documentation available. In Malaysia, TMP staff received training in 2017 in the assessment method (similar to the METT) that is used for the Coral Triangle Marine Protected Area System (CTMPAS). SIMCA is learning of the importance of

preparing and organising documentation so that management can benefit from past experiences and become “adaptive”.

The Malaysian workshop identified the value of scientific research to inform a number of the components of the Green List Standard, particularly the assessment of planning and design, and demonstration that a site is having a positive impact on biodiversity, for which sound monitoring programmes are needed.

Appropriate training for all involved in a Green List assessment is essential: the Standard and overall approach and requirements must be fully understood and supported by national protected area authorities and incorporated in the overall management framework so that managers use them automatically. This requires clear communication about the process and on the benefits of achieving Green List status.

The Green List Standard can also be used more generally to demonstrate the measures required for achieving successful biodiversity outcomes: protected area managers, planners, educators and scientists can use it to help guide the management of any conservation areas. For example, Mexico has indicated that it will apply for Green List status for its most important reserves in the first instance, but also use the Green List Standard as a guide for all other protected areas in the country.

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