

Good afternoon, everyone.

First, I would like to comment on the MPA's that we have in federal and state waters.

Some of my comments are based on the US Caribbean Marine Management Areas Data Report presented by Dr. Diana Beltran

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Off the west of PR, we have the only 3 MPA's establish in the EEZ which together cover an area of 92.3 square kilometers.

Tourmaline Bank (1993)

Tourmaline Bank (Seasonal Fishing Closure Area) was established by the NMFS in 1993 as a part of a rule that intended to protect and conserve the highly exploited reef fish resources of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Is located both in the EEZ (40%) and in the PR's territorial waters (60%) and has a no-take area of 31.4 km². Tourmaline Bank is a seasonal no-take zone with a closure between December 1 to February 28

Next slide , please (Bajo de Sico)

Bajo de Cico (1996)

The NMFS established in 1996 the seasonal closure in Bajo de Sico. The intended effect of this rule was to protect the Nassau grouper and red hind spawning aggregations by prohibiting fishing in these areas during the spawning season. The seasonal closure was initially proposed between December 1 and February 28 of each year. In 2010 NMFS modified the Bajo de Sico seasonal closure from a 3-month

closure to a 6-month and prohibited fishing for and possession of Caribbean reef fish in or from the exclusive economic zone. This final rule also banned anchoring in the EEZ portion of Bajo de Sico year-round. The intended effect of this rule was to provide further protection for red hind spawning aggregations and large snappers and groupers and better protect the essential fish habitat (EFH) where these species reside.

Since 2010, every year, BS is a seasonal no-take area between October 1 and March 31. The 60% is in the EEZ and 40% in state waters and cover a no take area of 31.4 km².

On 2007 Dr. Reni Garcia characterized the benthic ecosystems present at BS and no other study has been conducted since then. The current state or any change through time is unknown in this Marine Managed Area.

Abrir la Sierra (1996)

Was established in 1996 to improve fisheries management, emphasizing protecting spawning aggregations of red hind.

Cover a total area of 29.5 km² and is a seasonal no-take zone with a closure between December 1 to February 28.

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Dr. Reni García-Sais on 2010 characterized the closure, and the benthic ecosystems present at ALS have not been studied again, and thus there is no information available on its current condition.

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(PONER MAPA PR CON MMA's)

PR has many MMA's that have a coverage area of 3995.23 square kilometers. Some of them are:
Mona Island and Monito natural reserve,
Desecheo Island Coastal Waters Marine Natural Reserve,
Vieques Bioluminescent Bay Natural Reserve Marine y
The Tres Palmas Natural Marine Reserve among many others just to mention a few.

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(PONER TABLA 1 PAGINA 6)

Even though most of the areas do not have the establish criteria of complete protection, I one part of Dr. Beltran report says

According to Dr. Beltran:

“If we consider all US Caribbean EEZ waters, only 2.1% presents some form of protection (Table 1). However, if we include only the territorial waters, the protection increases to 29.2% for Puerto Rico and 27.7% for US Virgin Islands.”

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(PONER PUBLICACION PEW)

In a publication of PEW dated on January 19, 2022, titled:
“Longtime Conservationist Seeks to Shore Up Safeguards for PR's Oceans Treasures”

Alberto Mercado, Manager for The Nature Conservancy Program for PR say,

“PR designates more than a fifth of its waters as protected areas where migrating whales meet to calve, colorful coral reefs host animals ranging from sharks to parrotfish, and threatened fish such as the Nassau grouper gather to spawn under the full moon”

It is evident that not only PR also the entire American Caribbean have too many protected areas for the size of our territories.

And even so it is intended to increase its size to continue marginalizing the commercial fisherman who in my opinion are the ones who do the least damage to our fishing resources. But we are first I the line when is time to apply accountability measures.

In addition, we all know that there has been no effective monitoring of the conditions of all the protected areas we have.

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(PONER PRIMER PARRAFO DE INTRODUCCION)

On the first paragraph of the introduction of Dr. Beltran report say:

The oceans have degraded in the last decades as a result of human activities.

This decline is most notorious in coastal areas such coral reefs, where coral cover has decreased more than 50 % worldwide, and species commonly seen in the seventies are rarely observed today, especially commercial reef fishes. Conservation efforts are urgently needed to reduce such loss, recover depleted populations, and restore natural habitats.

This leads me to convince myself even more that the real problem that is affecting our habitats and marine ecosystems is inland.

The land base pollution it's a problem that negatively affects our resources.

We all know that runoff of all kinds, coastal erosion caused by excessive construction on our coasts and natural disasters among other factors have a huge negative impact in our marine resources.

These are issues that must be addressed if we really intend to protect our marine resources.

An example of this is the Tres Palmas Marine Reserve, where construction continues in its surroundings also, the septic tanks in the houses percolate into the sea and the human negligence is affecting so much.

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Example of this is a questionable event that occurred a few weeks ago where a police boat gets into the area with strong waves and ran aground on the shore and it causes great damage to the reef and to the fragile elkhorn corals.

We also cannot let pass the problem of invasive species and the seagrass that reach the shore causing a terrible damage to the entire ecosystem.

Well, in my opinion, it is worth establishing more MPA's if the causes that affect our resources are not addressed first?

We all know there is not effective monitoring and no plan to prevent problems from arising.

I see it as trying to fix a leak by collecting the water in a container instead of calling a plumber to fix the problem.

This is a matter of common sense because everything that happens on the coast as a chain reaction will eventually affect the more distant areas.

Most MPA's across the US have nothing to do with fishing activity. From military use like Cape Cañaveral in Florida to cultural Tribal and archeological sites like Thunder Bay Michigan.

However, many MPA's have been imposed by Presidents as a farewell present with little input from the victims (local people), with little or no science behind them.

Unfortunately, MPA's have lost its luster since they are at the mercy of politicians who use it as a reward for partisan loyalty. On one hand the NGO's and environmental activist who want to save the planet and on the other hand, the local population tribal communities, commercial and recreational sectors.

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To this point, as I speak the most prestigious universities and science organizations are asking the Director of the White House MPA official to resign. All these after a scientific integrity breach surrounding the proposed management of MPA's. An MPA is as good as the science and ass the need.

The rule of thumb is if ain't broke don't fix it and the most important rule is that the MPA must come from the bottom up, and not from the top down like most NGO's want to do.

In territories with no congressional nor US Senate votes the establishment of such MPA's tends to be arbitrary, capricious and to certain extent, racist.

Our Island has been going through a recession for years and we do not have a clear expectation of when it will end. We cannot overlook the decrease in population in the Island. Every day that passes we are getting older and the young blood that want to follow our steps are limited. In other words, we are running out of fishermen and less catch per unit effort is being implemented indirectly.

From my point of view, the management plans implemented by this Council are giving good results and it is not necessary to establish more MPA's because it could cause more harm than good.

Part of the foundations of the Magnuson Law in addition to protecting the resources and the fishermen socioeconomic stability is safety at sea.

Wanting to create more MPA's would force commercial fishermen to look for more distant areas to be able to carry out their work, increasing their costs and putting their lives at risk and at the same time. Also, it would create an environment to increase fishing pressure in areas where currently don't exist.

In my opinion we have better alternatives that could be more effective.

In addition to addressing the land base pollution issue, as I said before, it has already been proven that in regions such as the Caribbean where there is good fishing management, it's not necessary to have more MPA's.

Promoting other alternatives for consumption and fishing, as this Council are doing together with the Outreach and Education Panel, Jannette with Sea Grant and Marcos with the squid and swordfish fishing are examples of how we can reduce fishing pressure and protect our resources without trying to create more MPA's. Also it's necessary to increase the collaboration between fishers and the scientific community.

We need to increase the outreach and education campaigns in the community and improve the education of our enforcement officers to not only enforce the law, at the same time they can also correctly guide the users of our marine resources.

What is the use of finning someone if you don't let them know about the consequences of their actions?

When we manage fisheries, what we really do is manage people. And frankly folks, the people of PR and the US Virgin Islands have had to fare for ourselves for NOAA's bad decisions for decades. Point in case the appalling response from the US Government after Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Since 2000 we have had a 25% loss in population and industrial effort are at a 50% low.

Since 2008 we are in a recession, 15 years in red. And now we are flat broke, yes as in bankruptcy. It will take decades to fix this mess and to add injury to the insult is intended to establish more MPA's to fulfill a then candidate, now president political promise.

What a shame my friends what a disgrace. This is not personal but the proponents of this flawed and discredited MPA's should realize that we know you are doing this because are getting paid for it.

But please, make no mistake because at the end of all this you are getting paid to take us out of business.

Thank you very much for your attention.