

**Parliamentarians
for Global Action**



Marine Protected Areas: A Catalyst for Marine Conservation and Human Rights in São Tomé and Príncipe

Factsheet for Parliamentarians

Campaign for the Protection of the Oceans
and Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14

THE URGENCY OF MARINE PROTECTION

São Tomé and Príncipe, located in the marine biodiversity hotspot of the Gulf of Guinea, is home to a rich ecosystem that supports livelihoods and mitigates the impacts of the climate crisis.

On 27 September 2025, São Tomé and Príncipe became the [first country in the world to be entirely designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve](#), following the prior recognition of Príncipe Island in 2012. The archipelago also hosts the highest rate of endemic species per square kilometers on the planet – meaning these species are not found anywhere else in the world.

The country maintains a deep connection to the ocean and its resources, with 90 percent of the population living along the coast. Local fisheries serve as the second most important source of income for low-income families, and over half of the country's protein intake comes from fish.

However, the pressures from overfishing, habitat degradation, and the climate crisis are placing enormous stress on these life-supporting systems and posing a serious [threat to local fishing communities](#).

Marine Protected Areas, or MPAs,¹ serve as an efficient tool to remedy these alarming threats – restoring marine health, protecting livelihoods, and strengthening resilience to the climate crisis.

MPAs are clearly demarcated geographical areas which are recognized, dedicated, and managed through legal or other effective means to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.

Collections of MPAs that work together to meet objectives beyond those of a single area, or MPA networks, are critical to rebuilding ecological and social resilience. For example, well-integrated MPA networks can increase species survival by allowing mobility to escape pressures like overfishing.

MPAs are recognized in both the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#) as a vital tool to achieve the protection of 30 percent of the ocean by 2030.

This goal allows for healthier ecosystems and species, increases climate crisis mitigation through protection of coastal habitats that store carbon dioxide, reduces ocean risk from extreme weather events, secures livelihoods and food resources for all, raises abundance and diversity of species, creates safe havens for threatened species, and secures economic benefits from the ocean.

1. Parliamentarians for Global Action. (2022). *Factsheet for parliamentarians: Sustainably managed marine protected areas and climate change*. www.pgaction.org/pdf/2022/factsheet-sustainably-managed-MPAs_en.pdf

THE MPA PROCESS IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

Currently, approximately [0.01 percent](#) of São Tomé and Príncipe's waters are protected, with no formal designation of MPAs. This percentage, however, is expected to rise significantly due to a multi-year, multi-stakeholder effort to establish the country's first official marine protected areas.

[Beginning in 2019](#), consultations were conducted with local communities, private sector, government, and other stakeholders on each island to inform the co-design of MPAs. Local and international civil society organizations and 41 local fishing communities led this process to ensure that the voices from São Tomé and Príncipe islands were at the forefront.

Over the following years, this process resulted in the agreement of specific MPA sites and refined boundaries (see Annex).

Between 2022 and 2024, draft Decree Laws were submitted to officially designate these MPAs on each island: six areas surrounding Príncipe island, and two areas surrounding São Tomé island.

In 2022, the [National Fisheries and Aquaculture Law](#) recognized MPAs as an important mechanism for both environmental protection and marine resource management.

In November 2024, fishing community representatives, government officials, and other stakeholders endorsed the country's first fisheries management plan, the [National Plan for Fisheries and Aquaculture \(PENPA\) 2024-2034](#), demonstrating São Tomé and Príncipe's commitment to marine protection and the socio-economic sustainability of local communities.

Following a comprehensive legal review, the Decree Laws establishing the proposed MPAs were approved by the Council of Ministers in April 2025.

It is now pending the President's signature and subsequent publication in the national gazette.



SAFEGUARDING HUMAN RIGHTS: MARINE PROTECTED AREAS AS PILLARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

If effectively implemented, MPAs offer significant benefits that contribute to environmental sustainability, social and economic stability, and the protection of human rights:

Biodiversity Conservation

MPAs protect species and ecosystems that are crucial for maintaining the health of the ocean. In São Tomé and Príncipe, home to many unique species found nowhere else in the world, MPAs can **safeguard endangered species and contribute to the preservation of important marine habitats.**

1

Improved Fisheries

By allowing fish stocks to replenish, MPAs lead to increased biomass and improved fish populations in surrounding waters. This has **direct benefits for local fishers and coastal communities** in São Tomé and Príncipe, where fishing pressure has impacted the abundance and size of fish.

2

Climate Mitigation and Resilience

MPAs enhance ecosystem resilience, particularly through the preservation of coastal ecosystems like mangroves and seagrass beds, which play a **critical role in carbon storage and buffer extreme weather events.**

3

Tourism and Recreation

MPAs contribute to the growth of sustainable tourism, **providing long-term economic benefits to coastal communities.** The natural beauty and biodiversity of São Tomé and Príncipe's marine environment continue to strengthen the country's ecotourism potential. MPAs create sustainable opportunities to support local economies while preserving vibrant coral reefs and pristine beaches.

4

Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage

MPAs protect marine cultural heritage, including traditional fishing practices and natural landmarks, preserving the history and traditions of coastal communities in São Tomé and Príncipe. Many coastal areas hold **significant cultural value**, and MPAs help **safeguard these spaces for future generations**.

5

Models of Fair and Open Governance

MPAs can serve as models for inclusive and transparent decision-making processes and can recognize the rights of local communities and stakeholders, helping to share benefits and reduce conflicts over marine resources. In São Tomé and Príncipe, the **leadership of local communities has established a cooperative system for efficient management of these MPAs**.

6

Gender Equality

The fisheries sector is highly gendered, with women generally conducting the post-catch steps of the supply chain process. **MPAs provide opportunities for livelihoods and economic empowerment** where women's integration into other economic sectors remains a challenge.

7

International Commitments

São Tomé and Príncipe's international commitments include the Sustainable Development Goals and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework aimed at **protecting the ocean and its resources for all people of present and future generations**.

8



THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

Members of Parliament are essential to translating conservation commitments into action and are uniquely positioned to advance both human rights protection and ocean conservation through the effective implementation and expansion of Marine Protected Areas by:

Raising MPAs as a cross-cutting Priority

Ensure the topic of reaching 30 percent protection by 2030 is on your Parliament's agenda by raising the topic of effective MPAs with peers and government through parliamentary questions and/or in national and regional discussions, including budget allocations.

1

Enacting and Strengthening Legal Frameworks

Support robust MPA legislation that sets clear objectives and forms part of a broader, integrated policy framework to ensure the sustainable use of marine resources, along with strong governance, co-management, and effective enforcement mechanisms.

2

Championing Climate and Biodiversity Goals

Embed MPAs into broader climate and development policy initiatives and support your country's engagement on international fora in achieving the MPA goal of 30 percent by 2030.

3

Promoting Inclusive Dialogue

Facilitate participation of coastal communities, women, and youth in MPA planning, implementation, and co-management.

4

Fostering Regional Collaboration

Engage in platforms that promote regional cooperation and harmonized marine governance across the Gulf of Guinea.

5

Educating and Mobilizing

Raise awareness among peers, constituents, and civil society on the importance of marine conservation and the value of MPAs to human rights, climate resilience, food security, and long-term sustainability.

6

ANNEX: PROPOSED MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

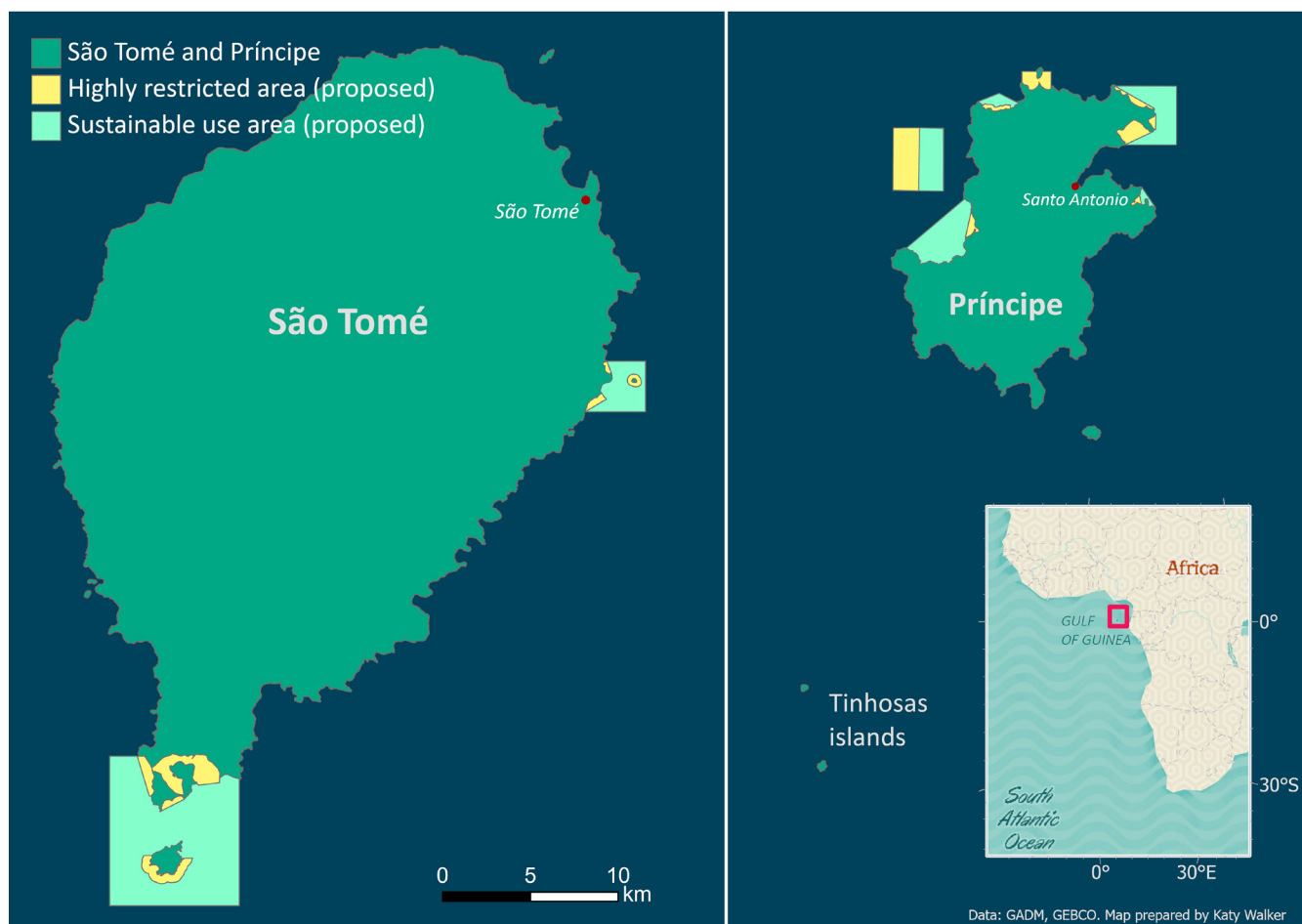


IMAGE CREDITS:

Cover: “[Marine Turtle Príncipe Island](#)” by [António D Abreu](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

p3: “[Sao Tome & Principe, fishermen’s beach launch area](#)” by [Bdickerson](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

p5: “[Praia de Coco on Bom Bom Island - Sao Tome and Principe](#)” by [David Stanley](#) from Nanaimo, Canada is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#).

p7: Data: GADM, GEBCO. Map prepared by Katy Walker.

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