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Will Funding Marine Planning Help Save Our Troubled Seas?

<https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2019/12/5/will-funding-marine-planning-help-save-our-troubled-seas>

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THE KINGDOM OF TONGA IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC IS WORKING WITH THE BLUE PROSPERITY COALITION ON MARINE CONSERVATION. PHOTO: VERONIKA HANZLIKOVÁ/SHUTTERSTOCK

We know that protecting the oceans is hard; it often requires cooperation between government, industry, conservationists, local communities and philanthropy. One way to look after an area of ocean is for stakeholders to

divide it into different zones for different activities. Some zones can return to a natural state (these are called marine protected areas, or MPAs), while others are used for fishing or tourism. Ideally, the resulting plan is both economically and environmentally sound. This is called marine spatial planning (MSP) and it's a strategy that recently received a big boost from the [Waitt Foundation](#).

Waitt Foundation founder and Chairman Ted Waitt was raised on a cattle ranch in Iowa and co-founded the computer company Gateway. He has been an environmental giver for about 20 years with a focus on marine protection and planning. Waitt supports sustainable ocean management through three organizations: the foundation, the Waitt Institute (the operational arm of the foundation that partners directly with governments), and the recently formed multi-sector Blue Prosperity Coalition (BPC), which helps nations with MSP.

Waitt announced its newest marine funding commitment at Our Ocean 2019. The sixth of these cross-sector international ocean conferences was held in Oslo, Norway, in October. Philanthropy [committed](#) \$234 million to ocean-related work this year. The Waitt-backed BPC revealed it would give \$150 million to assist governments with MSP over the next 10 years.

What is Marine Spatial Planning?

MSP, the coalition's main interest, uses spatial information about human activities and natural resources to plan out ocean use. Within a certain part of the ocean, MSP can lay out areas for fishing, recreation, offshore energy, shipping or other uses, along with MPAs. The protected areas help ecosystems recover and fisheries replenish. Once this occurs, fish populations often overflow into unprotected areas, sustaining fish-based industry and diets. More than 60 countries, including the U.S., engage in this type of marine planning [around the world](#).

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals aim to protect 10 percent of the oceans by 2020. Only about 4.8 percent is protected at this time, according to the [MPAtlas](#), a resource from the Marine Conservation Institute that Waitt supports. In 2014, the World Parks Congress [recommended](#) increasing ocean protected areas to about 30 percent, with no deadline. In 2016, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [called for](#) 30 percent of "each marine habitat" to be protected by 2030. The Waitt Foundation, Waitt Institute and BPC have adopted this 30 percent goal.

Waitt also references [research](#) from the University of York to back up the 30 percent target. In 2016, the authors analyzed 144 studies relating to ocean MPAs with various goals (economic, environmental, etc.) and found that more than half of the studies determined protecting 30 percent or more of the ocean area was necessary to achieve the desired goals. Only 3 percent found that 10 percent protection (the U.N. target) would be sufficient.

Lead author Dr. Bethan O'Leary [said](#) the findings are not surprising. "Wildlife and habitats evolved in the absence of human industrial exploitation, so it is only to be expected that intensively exploiting a large fraction of the oceans is not a viable option in the long term."

What the Blue Prosperity Coalition Does

The Waitt Foundation and the Waitt Institute frequently team up with organizations across sectors to create marine protected areas and plans, including governmental bodies, major and local environmental nonprofits, businesses and academic institutions. They work with funders like the Leonardo DiCaprio, Clinton, Ocean, San Diego, and Marisla foundations and others. The foundation has already given away \$70 million to 78 ocean-related projects in as many countries—we'll look at a few of its previous grants shortly. The new BPC 10-year commitment more than doubles this amount.

BPC was launched in March by the Waitt Foundation, Waitt Institute, National Geographic Pristine Seas, Oceans 5 and Dynamic Planet. Since then, the governments of Azores, Bermuda, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Maldives have entered the coalition. They join Barbuda, Curaçao, Montserrat and Tonga, which pioneered the Waitt Institute’s “Blue Prosperity” marine planning method before the coalition formally launched. Barbuda was the pilot for this program—it protected 33 percent of its ocean waters in 2014. BPC is already working with partner governments to protect more than 595,000 square miles of ocean. The new infusion of Waitt money is earmarked to support the current coalition and bring in new countries.

Drawing on the Waitt Foundation and Institute’s decades of ocean funding and programming experience, the coalition commits multi-year support to each partner country to help it establish science-based and legally-binding marine plans. When a new planning project launches, a cross-sector team begins a journey that includes community engagement, ecological mapping, financing, fisheries management, legislation, monitoring, revision and more.

Heather Zichal joined the Waitt Foundation as BPC executive director this summer. She previously served as vice president of corporate engagement for the Nature Conservancy (TNC) and deputy assistant to the president for Energy and Climate Change under Obama. Like Waitt, she grew up in Iowa. Zichal says that “more and more global communities [recognize] the need for ocean planning,” as well as the resources the coalition can offer to back “science, blue-economy planning, and legal and technical support.”

Waitt’s Other Commitments to Ocean Planning and Protection

In [2013](#), the Wildlife Conservation Society helped create two new MPAs on Argentina’s Patagonia coastline with support from the Waitt Foundation. In [2014](#), Waitt backed the expansion of National Geographic’s Pristine Seas campaign, a marine protection effort that began in 2009. DiCaprio, the

Helmsley Charitable Trust, Prince Albert of Monaco and other funders were on board, as well. Waitt also has an ongoing grants program with NatGeo that has provided millions of dollars for hundreds of projects in various fields of science.

In 2016, Waitt joined other funders, including DiCaprio and the Oak Foundation, to help TNC carry out a debt-for-nature deal with the Republic of Seychelles and establish new marine protected areas. TNC raised about \$21 million in investments and grants to pay off some of the Seychelles' debt to European creditors at a discount. The Seychelles repays the debt at a lower interest rate—some of the repayment money goes back to TNC's lenders, and the rest goes toward conservation. Seychelles committed eventually to protect 30 percent of its waters as part of the deal.

TNC stated it carried out years of public consultation as part of the trade. But, as we've [noted](#), these kinds of complex exchanges are [hard to carry out](#) and can yield [mixed](#) economic and environmental results. In the Seychelles, concerns include an incoming military base, potential oil exploration, and skepticism from some members of the local fishing industry. In 2019, TNC announced that Seychelles had protected about 26 percent of its waters. The Seychelles pay-off is still in progress, and TNC has similar debt swaps in the works in the Caribbean.

We've mentioned the large role U.S.-based NGOs and donors can play in a country's economy through these debt-for-nature plans. They raise [concerns](#) we see in other forms of global conservation and philanthropy regarding compatibility with democracy and sovereignty.

It's possible to draw some parallels here to BPC's current work helping governments with their MSP, wherein it gives countries funding and capacity-building support. Of course, its involvement with national MSP lacks the debtor/creditor power imbalance somewhat inherent in debt-for-nature arrangements. But when a U.S.-based funder finances marine planning around the globe, the question of national ownership of

conservation agendas may still arise. Bloomberg Philanthropies is another major American funder investing in ocean management abroad—see our recent coverage of its [Vibrant Oceans](#) program, which largely focuses on sustainable fishing. Major grantmakers that also fund international ocean and fishing programs include the Walton, Moore and Packard foundations, among others.

Collaborative Processes

On the other hand, marine planning processes are intended to be collaborative, linking nonprofits, researchers, funders, industry, local communities and government. The large-scale ocean plans and policies BPC supports are based on scientific, legal and socio-economic evaluations and are unique to each locality. They require ongoing cross-sector opt-in and management. And as more nations choose to set aside marine areas for protection and revamp their fishing industries, MSP funding facilitates the global shift toward more sustainable ocean usage.

Zichal says that throughout marine planning processes, BPC involves interested parties through advisory bodies, community, and stakeholder engagement processes, and social media and news efforts. In Tonga, the coalition is working on ocean plans that span more than 140 islands. BPC [stated](#) the Kingdom is undertaking a “robust” consultation process with every coastal community.

“Communities and oceans are intertwined. Ensuring communities are involved throughout ocean planning and management will help secure a healthy ocean future,” [said](#) Karen Stone, executive director of the Vava’u Environmental Protection Agency, a BPC partner in Tonga.

Zichal says community and political buy-in are “key” to marine planning. “Without it, MSP can’t be successful.” Similarly, a 2011 [analysis](#) of peer-reviewed literature relating to marine planning stated, “Stakeholder involvement was [the] most commonly cited effective practice claim.”

In 2016, Waitt also partnered with the Wildlife Conservation Society, Blue Moon Fund, and Global Environmental Facility to commit \$48 million to marine protection around the world. And, in 2019, the Regional Government of the Azores joined the Waitt Institute and Oceano Azul Foundation to launch the Blue Azores program, with a commitment to establish new marine protected areas covering 15 percent of the Azorean Exclusive Economic Zone, among other goals.

Azores President Vasco Cordeiro [said](#) the partnership will span generations and that “we should view this work not as a point of arrival, but rather as one more step in the larger goal of preserving the Azores for generations to come.” BPC also joined the Blue Azores program in 2019.

A few other major Waitt grantees include the Salk Institute for Biological Studies (where Waitt was once vice chair), Pew, Oceana and Conservation International.

Balancing Major Giving With Rapid Response Grants

Along with helping to enact nation-based ocean management schemes, Waitt funds front-line community groups through its Rapid Ocean Conservation (ROC) grants. These grants of up to \$20,000 are distributed within two weeks of funding decisions, which are made monthly. The grants must relate to sustainable fishing and/or MPAs, and can back research, policy, enforcement, infrastructure or communications. Zichal says they focus on “smaller-scale projects or proof of concept” and “community-led plans,” and that they complement Waitt’s mission of achieving 30 percent ocean protection. Past grantees have pioneered artificial reef habitats in Madagascar and worked to establish legal protections for a whale and dolphin sanctuary in Uruguay.

We asked Zichal if ROC grants ever overlap with or inform MSP projects.

She says if BPC were to “launch a project in a country where we have previously provided [an ROC grant] for MSP-related activities, the Waitt Institute... would consult with the local nonprofit and potentially fold that project into the [larger-scale initiative].”

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