



Everyone has heard of the Great Barrier Reef. But what about the Great Sea Reef?

Largely uncharted, this reef covers 20 million hectares of the Pacific around Fiji's many islands and contains a staggering array of biological diversity. Or so we are beginning to learn. The first-ever comprehensive survey of the reef, carried out in 2005, revealed thousands of hitherto undiscovered species and unique mangrove island habitats. But it also identified serious threats, including over-fishing, illegal and poison fishing and sand dredging.

Fiji realized that these threats were endangering its heritage, people's livelihoods and the potential for developing ecotourism. The chiefs of 40 fishing communities worked with local and international groups to establish the country's first marine protected areas (MPAs) on the Great Sea Reef.

The country is determined to establish a network of these areas covering 30 per cent of its waters. In all, nearly 39 million hectares – an area almost the size of Zimbabwe – will be protected. The areas will include 'tabu' zones, where fishing or harvesting of other marine resources is permanently banned.

Fiji's example is important because the seas have largely been left out of a successful conservation drive. In 1987, the Brundtland Report – which launched the concept of sustainable development – called for 12 per cent of the world's land area to be protected. In spite of huge scepticism, this was achieved within 15 years. However, only 1 per cent of the world's oceans is similarly safeguarded.



Special places have been set aside for protection since the dawn of history. India's sacred groves and Greece's Mount Olympus, for example, have been revered for thousands of years. Later, rulers set aside woods and heathlands in which only they could hunt. But modern protected areas originated in the second half of the 19th century, when Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks were established in the United States of America.

Parks were first set up to protect spectacular scenery and provide recreation, but they soon evolved to include ecosystems rich in diversity and habitats of threatened species. Now more than 102,000 protected areas cover more than 18.8 million square kilometres.

Up to 80 per cent of protected areas are thought to be safeguarded only in name, and are not actively managed. Conservationists press for these to be made more effective, as well as for new ones to be established. They stress the important things protected areas do besides protecting biodiversity – such as preserving water supplies and protecting against flooding.

As the climate changes, 'biological corridors' are needed to connect parks, to allow species to move as conditions alter. One such network is being established by the governments of Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Republic of the Congo. This unusual agreement between neighbouring countries, signed in 2005, will formally protect the unique forest of central Africa and more than 7.5 per cent of all the Congo basin, which is possibly even richer in diversity than the Amazon. It will allow threats such as poaching and illegal logging – which imperil the livelihoods and culture of local Pygmy communities – to be tackled throughout a forest, without being limited by national boundaries.



Photos: UNEP/Topham