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Gabon pledges ‘massive’ protected network for oceans

6 June 2017 / [Mongabay.com](#)

President Ali Bongo Ondimba announced to the UN Ocean Conference that the government of Gabon has created a network of marine protected areas the size of Costa Rica.



<https://news.mongabay.com/2017/06/gabon-pledges-massive-protected-network-for-oceans/>

- The network of marine protected areas covers some 53,000 square kilometers (20,463 square miles) of ocean, an area larger than Costa Rica.
- The marine parks and reserves could also draw tourists eager to catch a glimpse of the humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), olive ridley sea turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and leatherback sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) that all shuttle through Gabonese waters.
- Government officials are in the process of overhauling how they manage fisheries, and they hope the move to protect Gabon's territorial waters will improve the country's food security and give its citizens a better chance to earn a living from fishing.

Whales, dolphins, sea turtles and fish living off the coast of Gabon now enjoy similar protections to those designed to safeguard the Central African nation's gorillas, elephants and other land-dwelling megafauna.

On June 5 at the UN Ocean Conference in New York City, the country's president, Ali Bongo Ondimba, said that Gabon is



An eel swims among sea anemones off the coast of Gabon. Photo by Enric Sala/National Geographic

"President Bongo Ondimba once again has demonstrated his courage and his vision by translating our science and exploration work into policy," said Michael Fay, a scientist with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), in a [statement](#) by WCS. The network of marine protected areas including nine parks and 11 reserves covers some 53,000 square kilometers (20,463 square miles) of ocean, an area larger than Costa Rica.

The announcement caps five years of research into Gabon's marine ecosystems and meetings between environmental and fishing organizations. WCS says that the reserves will protect important habitats, from river deltas to depths down to 4 kilometers (2.5 miles). The marine parks and reserves could also draw tourists eager to catch a glimpse of the humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), olive ridley sea turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and leatherback sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) that all shuttle through Gabonese waters.

Fishing will also be allowed within parts of the network. Government officials are in the process of overhauling how they manage fisheries, and they hope the move will improve the country's food security and give Gabon's citizens a better chance to earn a living from fishing.

[Illegal fishing by vessels from non-African countries](#) has increasingly become a problem for the continent's coastal nations in recent decades.

Scientists from around the globe applauded the decision to set aside the reserves along the 800-kilometer (497-mile) coast.



A leatherback turtle (Dermochelys coriacea) nests on a beach in Gabon. Photo by A. Formia/Wildlife Conservation Society

"The political will for achieving conservation and sustainable wildlife and fisheries management in Gabon is exemplary," said Richard Ruggiero, who heads the Division of International Conservation at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in the WCS statement. "This makes us optimistic for the survival of the many species that can be found in Gabon's waters."

In fact, it was that array of life that convinced President Bongo to back a plan to protect Gabon's slice of the Atlantic Ocean. In 2012 he visited a team of scientists who had just finished conducting research off the country's coast for what was known as the "[Pristine Seas](#)" expedition. (The expedition was later featured in the film *Wild Gabon*.)

"The richness we saw underwater in Gabon in 2012 gave us hope, and Gabon's action shows tremendous leadership that we hope will resonate and be replicated across Africa's coasts," said National Geographic explorer-in-residence Enric Sala in the statement.

Sala and Fay led the team, which also included representatives of the Gabonese National Parks Agency, and they shared their findings with Bongo.

"[S]eeing the results of the Pristine Seas expedition made me realize that our marine ecosystems were as rich and as precious as our [better-known rainforests], and that we had to do for the oceans what my father ... President Omar Bongo Ondimba did for the forests when he created 13 national parks in 2002," Bongo said.



A humpback whale breaching off the coast of Gabon. Photo and caption by T. Collins/Wildlife Conservation Society

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Article published by John Cannon on 2017-06-06.



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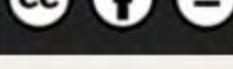


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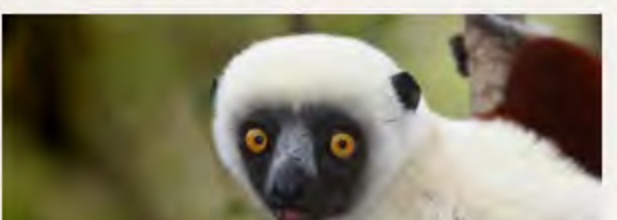


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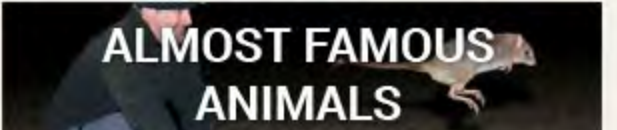
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