# Submission to the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans regarding its Marine and Coastal Protection study

## Brief on the benefits of Marine Protected Areas – Summary

Overfishing, destructive fishing practices and the increase in industries like shipping, offshore oil and gas, and ocean infrastructure have driven significant declines in Canada's marine ecosystems. Fish stocks are suffering, seafloor disturbance is damaging habitat and ecosystems, and bycatch is threatening species survival – all of this exacerbated by climate change.

There is scientific consensus that protecting 30% of the coast and ocean globally would allow us to avoid catastrophic climate change, conserve marine life, and secure the essential ecosystem services that the ocean provides. In response, Canada has committed to protecting 30% of its land and waters by 2030, through Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and other conservation measures. Ocean conservation, including MPAs, is politically very popular: in a 2022 Canada-wide poll, most respondents had never heard of MPAs, but after they were explained, 97% of respondents either strongly or somewhat supported them.

Like nature reserves on land, MPAs set aside parts of the ocean where harmful human activities are limited, allowing marine life and habitats to recover from threats and thrive over the long term.

MPAs safeguard our food sources and strengthen the ocean's ability to withstand climate change, providing long term benefits to the environment, coastal communities and the economy.

Some critics of MPAs claim that Canada has a "world-class" fisheries management system, and that MPAs are thus not required. However, the data shows a different story. Only 35% of Canadian fish stocks are considered healthy, and there are rebuilding plans for only 12 of 33 critically depleted stocks, despite these plans being legally required under the *Fisheries Act* since 2019.

Many critics of MPAs overlook this data, as well as documented weaknesses of current fisheries management. These include permitting harmful fishing practices like bottom trawling and overharvesting to continue. Critics also ignore the unique ability of MPAs to protect whole ecosystems over the long term from other harmful human activities – such as oil and gas exploration, seabed mining and ocean dumping.

Studies have documented the multitude of benefits to commercial fisheries provided by MPAs, including increased fish stock and catch volumes, higher reproduction and larval "spillover" or seeding to fisheries, and larger fish and lobsters close to MPAs. These studies also demonstrate that these benefits frequently come at no net cost to fishermen and frequently result in significant net gains.

If properly established and managed, MPAs can provide many benefits, including:

- **Helping marine ecosystems recover** from industrial impacts like overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution and underwater noise.
- **Buffering against climate change** impacts by promoting greater biodiversity, thus increasing resistance and recovery to climate stress.
- **Protecting the fisheries economy** by protecting habitats and giving fish space to recover, thus rebuilding stocks and increasing catches.
- **Increasing tourism revenue to coastal communities**.
- **Creating new jobs** including in MPA management, monitoring and enforcement, and tourism.
- **Supporting food security and human health**, through rebuilding and sustaining abundant fish stocks.
- **Providing opportunities for co-governance**, which has been proven to result in better conservation outcomes over the long term and **protecting culturally important areas and species**.