All those with a stake in protecting their coastal and marine environments should encourage their governments to propose PSSAs to the IMO.

Coastal nations should involve coastal managers and communities in identifying candidate areas and preparing proposals for PSSA identification and protection for submission to the IMO.

Where a sensitive and vulnerable site is shared by two or more countries, they should work together on a proposal and develop joint protective measures.

Coastal nations should work within the IMO to ensure that the process for PSSA identification is kept simple and speedy, rather than cumbersome and slow.

Further reading:
WWF brochure:
Marine Protected Areas,
November 1998

Marine Update 29:
Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas
February 1997

Marine Update 24:
Shipping and the Environment:
Assessing the Risks
February 1996

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WWF works to reconcile the needs of people with the conservation of the natural environment upon which they depend.

PSSAs
Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas
a precautionary tool to protect the world’s sensitive marine ecosystems from shipping impacts such as oil spills, ship groundings, anchor damage and rubbish.
Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSAs) are areas of the seas and oceans that need special protection through action by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) because of their ecological, economic, cultural or scientific significance, and their vulnerability to harmful impacts from shipping activities.

PSSAs can benefit valuable ecosystems such as coral reefs, coastal wetlands and important habitats. They are also important for migrating birds, sea turtles, whales or other marine species, as well as feeding grounds for valuable fish species.

In addition, they can benefit marine areas of particular importance for tourism, recreation, traditional subsistence, science or education. And if any of the above areas are close to shipping lanes, suffer from bad weather, have narrow passages, shallow depths or submerged reefs, or are otherwise sensitive to shipping impacts, they may need PSSA assistance to protect them.

International law limits the ability of coastal nations to impose and enforce their own environmental and navigation regulations on foreign ships passing through their waters. Within their 12-mile territorial waters, coastal nations may not 'impose' a foreign ship's right of innocent passage. Beyond the territorial seas, in the Exclusive Economic Zone or equivalent extending out to 200 miles from the shore, coastal states can only adopt regulations that have been previously approved by the IMO. As such, international regulations are generally meant to apply to all ships everywhere. Thus it can be difficult to protect discrete areas of the marine environment that are particularly sensitive. However, through PSSAs, area-specific rules can be matched to local needs and conditions.

PSSAs can help coastal nations prevent accidents, avoid habitat damage and stop intentional pollution by regulating the passage of ships through or away from sensitive areas. The marking of PSSAs on nautical charts also serves to inform mariners of the need to take special care when approaching a sensitive area. Some of the measures available through the IMO to protect PSSAs include:

- **Areas to be Avoided**: Specific regions, such as coral reefs, are excluded from shipping to protect their ecosystems.
- **Traffic separation schemes**: Requires ships to stay within designated lanes to avoid dense traffic areas.
- **Inshore traffic zones and deep water routes**: These are navigation routes that ships must follow to minimize risk to sensitive areas.
- **Special discharge restrictions**: Regulation of the discharge of pollutants to protect marine life.
- **Pilotage requirements**: Ensures ships use local pilots who are expert local navigators.
- **Vessel traffic management service systems**: Help manage and control ships' passage through potentially sensitive areas.
- **Special innovative measures**: Other measures that can be developed to protect specific areas.

A PSSA can be a useful management tool to protect nationally designated marine protected areas that are vulnerable to shipping impacts. However, PSSAs do not have to be restricted to national marine protected areas; they can also protect other ecologically, economically, or socially significant marine areas that are exposed to threats from shipping. The global publicity generated through PSSA identification can sometimes benefit the area further by stimulating efforts to protect it from other potentially harmful maritime activities such as drilling, dredging and fishing, or land-based operations that cause pollution or wetlands destruction, for example.

If it is to be successful, a petition should include an assessment of the area’s sensitivity to shipping activity. They may need PSSA assistance to protect them.

The Guidelines for Designation of Special Areas and Identification of Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSAs) provide the criteria and procedure for identification of a PSSA. A petition will need to show that the area is significant in at least one of the criteria listed in Box 1:

**Box 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria/Scope</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| Ecological | **PSSA, particularly sensitive area (PSA)**: An area that is particularly sensitive to the shipping activity. This could include areas that have a unique ecosystem, are home to endangered species or are critical to the survival of certain species. Other areas that have special ecological significance or are ecologically valuable. An area that is ecologically unique or has been modified or degraded by human activity or natural processes. An area that is ecologically representative of a particular ecosystem or biogeographical region. An area that is ecologically vulnerable to shipping impacts. A group of PSA’s that meet the criteria for the area.
| Educational | An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of educational value. This could include an area that is a significant tourist destination or a location that is important for educational purposes. An area that is protected or managed for educational purposes. An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of cultural or scientific value.
| Economic | An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of economic value. This could include an area that is a significant tourist destination or a location that is important for educational purposes. An area that is protected or managed for educational purposes. An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of cultural or scientific value.
| Social, Cultural and Economic | An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of social, cultural or economic value. This could include an area that is a significant tourist destination or a location that is important for educational purposes. An area that is protected or managed for educational purposes. An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of cultural or scientific value.
| Environmental | An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of environmental value. This could include an area that is a significant tourist destination or a location that is important for educational purposes. An area that is protected or managed for educational purposes. An area that is recognised as a PSSA and is of cultural or scientific value.

PSSAs enable coastal states to:

- Gain global publicity for the significance of an area.
- Inform mariners of the need to take special care when transiting the area.
- Regulate shipping through IMO measures to protect the area.
- Adopt innovative measures based on the specific needs of the area.
- Provide protection based on the needs of an ecosystem.
- Protect the economic values of an area such as fish farms, important tourist beaches and fisheries.
- Stimulate national and local action to provide more comprehensive protection.

Despite the clear benefits of PSSA identification, some countries have been slow to take advantage of this tool.

Text provided by Kristine Gjerde

*The Guidelines for Designation of Special Areas and Identification of Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSAs) are areas of the seas and oceans that need special protection through action by international law to protect them. The criteria for designation are as follows: ecological, economic, cultural or scientific significance, as well as their vulnerability to shipping impacts. PSSAs can be useful management tools to protect areas that are ecologically unique or have been modified or degraded by human activity or natural processes. They can also protect other areas that are ecologically significant to shipping. The global publicity generated through PSSA identification can sometimes benefit the area further by stimulating efforts to protect it from other potentially harmful maritime activities such as drilling, dredging and fishing, or land-based operations that cause pollution or wetlands destruction, for example. If it is to be successful, a petition should include an assessment of the area's sensitivity to shipping activity. They may need PSSA assistance to protect them.*