



Achieving Fair and Effective Marine Protected and Conserved Areas in Belize Through The IUCN Green List Standard:

A proposed roadmap for engaging Belize Marine Protected Areas in the IUCN Green List Standard and independent verification process.



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Overview

This report will guide the implementation of the IUCN Green List Standard across Belize's MPA network, leveraging the Belize Blue Bond to prioritise investments that will help achieve and sustain effective management and conservation outcomes.

1. Recommended scenarios for Green List recognition for Belize's Marine Protected Areas

Based on the IBEX scores and detailed evaluations, four scenarios are proposed to engage Belize's Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the IUCN Green List process. These scenarios focus on different strategies to improve management effectiveness and meet the Green List standard. Each scenario offers a distinct path forward, with varying implications for resource allocation, timeline, and overall impact on Belize's marine protected areas and their inclusion in the IUCN Green List.

Scenario 1. Lead by example, taking a 'Low-Hanging Fruit' approach

This approach targets those three MPA sites with the highest perceived likelihood of achieving IUCN Green List status within the next three years, based on IBEX, pre-assessment exercise, and MEE assessment results, namely:

- Caye Caulker Marine Reserve
- Blue Hole Natural Monument
- Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve

These sites already exhibit strong governance, effective design and planning, and robust management, making them the closest to meeting the Green List standards. By focusing on top-performing MPAs, rapid progress can be achieved with limited investment in capacity building and addressing immediate gaps in conservation initiatives. These sites can then serve as a 'blueprint' and lead demonstration for the other MPAs to engage with and learn from.

Scenario 2. Support and investment approach

This scenario is the opposite of the previous one. It concentrates on areas that need substantial support to meet IUCN Green List Standard, prioritising those sites where investment is critically needed and where gains in performance and effectiveness can make a significant difference:

- Glover's Reef Marine Reserve
- Port Honduras Marine Reserve
- South Water Caye Marine Reserve

Leveraging the financial support from the Belize Blue Bond, targeted interventions can be implemented to strengthen management strategies, enhance threat management, establish robust monitoring systems, and ultimately demonstrate successful conservation outcomes. This approach allows for gradual improvement in meeting Green List criteria, but it does not guarantee inclusion in the Green List within three years. However, it is likely that other sites will continue to improve and take heed of the approach and lessons from these three, resulting in a 'rising tide' of MPA improvement across the system and reducing further disparities in effectiveness between MPA sites.

Scenario 3. Most prominent sites

This scenario targets prominent MPAs, in particular the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System (BBRRS, 1996), recognised for its outstanding universal value due to its exceptional array of reef types. This includes seven sites: Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve, Blue Hole Natural Monument, Half Moon Caye Natural Monument, South Water Caye Marine Reserve, Glover's Reef Marine Reserve, Laughing Bird Caye National Park and Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve.

In its latest World Heritage assessment cycle (IUCN World Heritage Outlook, 2020), also aligned to the IUCN Green List Standard, IUCN has assessed the conservation outlook for "Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System" (BBRRS, 1996) as "significant concern". While the management is mostly effective, the site's values are highly threatened by climate change impacts, notably ocean acidification, which causes periodic large-scale mortality of coral cover; the invasion of Indo-Pacific lionfish; and coastal development driven by tourism on islands and cayes. Additionally, extensive overfishing of finfish, conch, and lobster has led to the loss of fishing aggregations, low populations of key species, and an increase in macroalgae covering the reefs. It is noted that Belize has taken active measures to address these threats. In this context, the Green List process could help measure progress, identify any remaining gaps, and facilitate the exchange of experiences, good practices, and access to technical resources. In this scenario, it is recommended to consider the BBRRS world heritage site as a multisite application to the Green List, in other words, promoting the whole network as one 'Green Listing' application, with criteria evaluated across individual sites.

Scenario 4. Balanced improvement approach

This approach involves a mix of high-scoring and lower-scoring sites to balance efforts between maintaining high standards and improving underperforming areas, for example:

- Caye Caulker Marine Reserve (IBEX Score: 77%). Priority actions: maintain and enhance current practices to achieve Green List status
- South Water Caye Marine Reserve (IBEX Score: 60%). Priority actions: focus on threat management, increase capacity and resources, and improve conservation outcomes.
- Glover's Reef Marine Reserve (IBEX Score: 44%). Priority actions: address significant gaps in management and governance, increase resource allocation, and develop robust monitoring systems.

The final choice focuses on sites with common issues that can be addressed coherently and in a complementary manner, such as acquiring equipment, training staff, and designing financial strategies and monitoring systems. This unified approach benefits multiple sites as they share similar ecological and socio-economic contexts. It ensures that efforts are distributed evenly, addressing the needs of both high-performing and underperforming MPAs. This balanced strategy promotes inclusive growth, leading to a more resilient and effective marine protected area network.

Table 1. Comparison of the four proposed scenarios

Scenario	Pros	Cons
1. “Low Hanging Fruit”	<p>High likelihood of success Focusing on the top-performing MPAs increases the chances of achieving Green List status due to their existing strong governance and management.</p> <p>Less resource-intensive Efforts and resources can be concentrated on areas already close to meeting IUCN Green List Standard criteria.</p>	<p>Limited impact if only focusing on already well-performing areas Only a few MPAs benefit directly, which might not significantly impact the overall marine conservation network in Belize.</p> <p>May overlook areas needing significant support Other MPAs might feel neglected, which could hinder their development and overall network performance.</p>
2. Comprehensive support and investment	<p>Promotes long-term sustainability and capacity building. Addresses areas with critical needs. Enhances overall management and governance of marine protected areas</p>	<p>Longer timeline for visible results. Higher resource investment. Uncertain short-term outcomes regarding IUCN Green List inclusion.</p>
3. Prominent sites approach	<p>High visibility Targeting World Heritage sites and other prominent MPAs brings international attention and can attract additional funding and support.</p> <p>Comprehensive impact Improves management in high-value and ecologically significant areas, which can have broader ecological and socio-economic benefits.</p>	<p>Resource intensive The BBRRS World Heritage site might require more significant investments and efforts to meet the IUCN Green List standard due to its complexity and the pressures it face (coastal development, tourism growth, invasive species, impacts of climate change).</p> <p>Risk of overextension Focusing on high-profile sites might spread resources and potentially limit effectiveness.</p>
4. Balanced improvement Approach	<p>Holistic development Addresses both high-performing and constrained MPAs, leading to a more balanced and comprehensive</p>	<p>Resource allocation challenges Balancing resources between high and low-performing sites can be challenging and might dilute</p>

	<p>improvement across the network.</p> <p>Inclusive growth Ensures that improvements and benefits are distributed more evenly, fostering a sense of inclusion and collective progress among all MPAs.</p>	<p>the impact on top-performing MPAs.</p> <p>May face challenges in balancing short-term and long-term goals</p> <p>Complex coordination Requires effective coordination and management to address diverse needs and challenges across different MPAs.</p>
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2. Key steps for engaging Belize's Marine Protected Areas in the IUCN Green List

Phase 1. Engage - Preparation and capacity building (months 1-6)

The initial step involves complementing and quality-checking self-evaluation data for all MPAs by exchanging information with managers to consolidate and calibrate the data if necessary, followed by verification and creating a consolidated MPA dashboard. This is accompanied by discussions with MBECA and JNCC to explore proposed options and validate a comprehensive roadmap. A national workshop is then held to discuss and endorse the roadmap, including the official announcement of site commitments.

The establishment and training of the EAGL (Expert Assessment Group for the Green List) will take place as a priority, ensuring representation of IP and LCs (Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities) and the inclusion of young professional experts (conservation practitioners under 35 years of age). This step also involves nominating and training mentors who will guide the MPAs through the Green List process. The EAGL might focus on adapting the IUCN Green List Standard indicators and proposed means of verification to fit the Belizean context. This also involves consolidating the crosswalk between MEE and the Green List, using the IUCN Green List self-assessment IBEX scoring, and producing guidance tailored to Belize's MPAs. If necessary, specific adaptations are considered, particularly concerning the status of fishing within protected marine areas and the involvement of IP and LCs.

Stakeholder engagement is a critical part of this phase, involving orientation and consultation meetings with stakeholders, local communities, NGOs, and partners to establish advisory committees and appoint mentors for targeted MPAs. Training and capacity building are also emphasised, providing in-depth training on the Green List standard and the Green List self-assessment tool for MPA managers and staff, and enhancing capacities in monitoring, enforcement, and stakeholder engagement.

Phase 2. Diagnose - Strategic planning and resource allocation (months 7-12)

Phase 2 begins with conducting in-depth assessments and diagnosis of the selected MPAs using the IUCN Green List Standard as a framework. These assessments aim to identify gaps and areas for improvement by documenting existing conditions, governance structures, and management practices. Based on the results of monitoring and diagnosis, management practices will be continuously adapted, and targeted conservation measures implemented according to the findings.

Securing finance is a critical component of this phase. The Belize Blue Bond and other funding sources are used to secure financial support for the implementation of local actions that will help achieve the IUCN Green List criteria. IUCN can provide support and expertise for further MPA diagnosis, MPA project design, technical oversight of progress, and support an assured determination and evaluation of key performance indicators. Financial sustainability plans are developed for each MPA to ensure long-term funding and resource availability.

Through informed project design, resource allocation is then conducted strategically, based on the needs and priorities identified in the baseline assessments. Investments are made in necessary infrastructure, equipment, and human resources to support effective MPA management.

Phase 3. Improve – Implementation and monitoring (months 13-24)

Management practices and conservation measures are implemented in line with the self-assessment findings, ensuring that strategies are effectively addressing identified gaps. A robust monitoring and evaluation framework are established to track progress, allowing for the regular collection and analysis of data on key conservation indicators (specific Key Performance Indicators and NECO table). This data informs the adaptation of management strategies to ensure ongoing improvement, with a focus on robust monitoring, effective management, and active stakeholder engagement to achieve the IUCN Green List Standard for Belize's MPAs.

When feasible within the timeline, management plans for each MPA are updated to incorporate alignment with the IUCN Green List criteria. Governance improvements are also a key focus, with efforts to ensure transparent decision-making and active stakeholder participation. Regular communication channels with stakeholders and communities are established to maintain engagement and support for the MPAs. Targeted conservation actions, such as habitat restoration, species monitoring, and threat mitigation, are implemented to address specific conservation needs.

Annual reporting and remediation follow, where an annual report is prepared to update the progress towards IUCN Green List status, including updates to the IUCN Green List Dashboard (IUCN's content and data management system for the Green List is powered by Esri GIS technology and uses a Salesforce.com database). During this stage, priority action plans are discussed, and activities, timelines, and

support needs are coordinated. These action plans are then implemented to ensure continued conservation efforts towards the Green List criteria.

Phase 4. Evaluate, determine outcomes, independently certify as achieving the IUCN Green List Standard - Reporting and continuous improvement (months 25-36)

Once sites are confident in their alignment with the Green List Standard, an evaluation process is initiated that includes meaningful stakeholder engagement and comprehensive site visits. The EAGL conducts evaluations, along with external assessments by ASI (Assurance Services International) using IUCN's assurance procedure, with final decisions taken by the Independent IUCN Green List Panel. This ensures a thorough, assured, credible and independent assessment process.

Reporting and documentation of evidence play a crucial role in this phase. Achievements and progress towards Green List criteria are documented meticulously yet cost-effectively (building on existing information and compiling data and metrics over time), and comprehensive reports are prepared and submitted to the IUCN Green List Panel. This ensures transparency and accountability in the certification process.

Finally, scaling up involves sharing successes and lessons learned with other MPAs in Belize and the wider region. A roadmap is developed for scaling up Green List implementation across additional MPAs, ensuring broader adoption of best practices in marine conservation.

3. Support from the Belize Blue Bond

The Belize Blue Bond can provide essential financial support to achieve Green List status for at least three MPAs by funding conservation projects that address gaps identified in baseline assessments, with a focus on project design to enhance ecological resilience through coral reef restoration and sustainable fisheries management. It will also support capacity-building and training programs for MPA staff and stakeholders, fostering local expertise in adaptive management, ecological monitoring, and community engagement. Additionally, the Blue Bond will invest in essential infrastructure and equipment, such as GIS, surveillance technology, research facilities, and visitor management systems, ensuring that MPAs have the necessary tools to effectively manage and protect marine resources.

Table 2. Gantt chart of the proposed activities

	Year 1				Year 2				Year 3			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12
Phase 1. Engage - Preparation and capacity building												
Quality-checking self-evaluation, data calibration												
Consolidated MPA dashboard												
Establishment and training of the EAGL												
Nomination and training of mentors												
Adaptation of the IUCN Green List Standard indicators												
Crosswalk between MEE and the Green List												
Training and capacity building to site managers												
Phase 2. Diagnose - Strategic planning												
In-depth assessments and diagnosis												
Securing finance – Belize Blue Bond												
Phase 3. Improve – Implementation and monitoring												
Definition of action plans												
Implementation of corrective measures												
Annual reporting												
Self assessment update (dashboard)												
Phase 4. Evaluate, determine outcomes												
EAGL evaluation												
External Assessment (ASI)												
Lesson learned workshop												
Roadmap for scalling up												

4. Conclusion

This proposed roadmap outlines an approach to engaging Belize's MPAs in the IUCN Green List process, focusing on key areas of governance, design and planning, effective management, and conservation outcomes, as identified through self-assessment (refer to sites report). Demonstrating successful conservation outcomes remains a challenge for many MPAs, necessitating robust monitoring systems, clear conservation targets, and regular reporting to track progress and adapt management strategies. This roadmap provides a foundation for discussion and decision-making, leveraging the support of the Belize Blue Bond to achieve IUCN Green List status and establish a global model for marine conservation.

The four proposed scenarios—focusing on low-hanging fruit, prominent sites, comprehensive support and investment, and a balanced improvement approach—offer strategic options for prioritising MPAs in the Green List process. IUCN can support each of these scenarios. The balanced improvement approach is recommended to ensure inclusive growth and comprehensive improvement across the MPA network.

Regardless of the scenario chosen, the Belize Blue Bond offers a unique opportunity to secure the financial support needed to achieve Green List status. The implementation pathway includes preparation and capacity-building phases, strategic planning and resource allocation, implementation and monitoring, and reporting and continuous improvement. This structured approach ensures Belize's MPAs are well-equipped to achieve and sustain IUCN Green List status.