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COMMUNICATIONS

#MPADAY

# Overview

A marine protected area (MPA) is an area of coastland that is specially protected for the benefit of people and nature. Vitally important; never talked about.

In March 2021, passionate South African nature lovers formed the **MPA Alliance** and audaciously declared the world's first Marine Protected Areas Day, to create awareness about these "**game reserves of the sea**".

**On 1 August 2021, South Africa observed MPA Day.** The MPA Day campaign reached **three million-plus people on social media** and garnered R5-million in media coverage – without a cent being spent. In 2022, MPA Day will be celebrated in nine countries.

[Link to the Youtube video](#)



# Problem or Opportunity

**Marine protected areas (MPAs)** are where marine species from whales to sardines and seabirds breed, so the health of our oceans is highly reliant on them. We wanted to **raise awareness and appreciation of South Africa's 42 MPAs, and fight for their protection.**

Work began in the 1990s to map and make a case for the MPAs in SA, but once they were proclaimed in 2014, the South African Association for Marine Biological Research (SAAMBR) and its many allies realised that there was a need for a big communication plan to keep the areas and their benefits on the national radar.

**The idea for MPA Day was conceived among colleagues within the SAAMBR network,** under the auspices of a new civil society lobby group, the MPA Alliance.

**The ultimate aim of the purpose-led MPA Day campaign was to lay the foundation** for an annual MPA Day celebration, to advance ocean conservation efforts and provide a platform for important conversations about MPAs, including the societal, economic and environmental benefits they offer.

The measurable objective was to create the conditions for South Africa (and other countries) to celebrate MPAs by observing MPA Day, and to keep on celebrating MPA Day.

# Research

**Initial research began in the 1990s when scientists began mapping coastal and offshore biodiversity and ocean usage, and engaging in extensive public consultation, to determine where South Africa's MPAs should be situated.**

Once the MPAs were proclaimed in 2014, research conducted among visitors to uShaka Sea World Aquarium indicated that few people knew what a marine protected area was, much less their benefits to nature and people. **The public narrative was framed entirely around nature and science**, not around how MPAs could make a difference in the lives of coastal populations or their benefits to the wider community.

We needed a way to introduce the topic of MPAs and their benefits into the national conversation. Desktop research revealed that, while there are almost 140 different environmental days, like World Wetlands Day and World Ocean Day, none were dedicated to marine protected areas.

We gleaned supporting information from resources such as the Marine Protected Areas website, as well as the **South African National Biodiversity Institute and the Oceans & Coasts Branch of the Department of Environmental Affairs.**

We also applied learned experience about running a virtual event. This action research technique taught us the power of identifying a particular day to focus and galvanise people behind a cause.

This research deeply informed the MPA Alliance's approach to creating an awareness campaign and led to the hosting of a successful reputation-building event.

# Planning

In planning the very first MPA Day in South Africa, the **MPA Alliance hoped to tap into the global conversations around climate change** and biodiversity as the world edged closer to the **COP26 climate conference in November 2021.**

**1 August 2021** was selected as the inaugural MPA Day, as it was on that day in 2019 when South Africa's 20 new or expanded MPAs were gazetted as protected.

The aim was to jumpstart awareness of the first MPA Day by reaching **one million people**, highlighting the role MPAs play in ensuring that our natural heritage and livelihoods are appropriately managed, for current and future generations.

This was an ambitious and even audacious target, particularly since it was a **100% pro bono campaign with zero budget.** But we believed that by calling in favours and leveraging networks, it was wholly achievable.

The MPA Alliance decided to use **social media and public relations, driven by marketing and communications agency Flow Communications** and PR company Olivia Jones Communications (OJC), as the main channels for the campaign, leading up to a curated online event on MPA Day.

There was a deliberate intention to ensure that the messaging was simple, accessible and easy to understand, so ordinary people – not just academics specialising in the marine environment – could join the conversation.



The campaign goal was **SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound)** in that it sought to:

- Create awareness around South Africa's MPAs and get ordinary South Africans involved in the conversation around the value and importance of MPAs **by reaching one million people** with messages about the value of marine protected areas in the month leading up to 1 August 2021, as well as on the day itself
- **Our target audiences were two-fold:**
  1. Government and key decision makers, both nationally and internationally
  2. The general South African public
- **Our message to decision makers was:**  
Please support MPA Day specifically, and MPAs in general
- **And to the public our message was:**  
MPAs belong to you and should be celebrated

The messaging focused on creating awareness about:

- **Marine protected areas** and their importance
- **Ocean conservation** and how people can play a role in marine protection
- **How ordinary people benefit** from and can enjoy marine protected areas

**Press interviews were arranged to complement the social media push** to ensure the message was disseminated as widely as possible.

Conversations were specifically designed so ordinary South Africans could realise that the beach or the whale-watching spot they love are part of our protected marine ecosystem, and that they derive value from the conservation of our marine areas.

The tone of the messaging was simple, friendly and engaging so ordinary South Africans could join the conversation.

**The team leveraged friendships and connections in the marine conservation field to get conversations going, including with:**

- Two Oceans Aquarium
- uShaka Marine World
- Dyer Island Conservation Trust
- WildOceans
- Save our Seas Cape Town
- WWF South Africa

A photographic competition (for which companies donated amazing prizes) was launched to encourage South Africans to share their connection to the ocean. A special Song for the

Seas jingle was written to use on social media, to promote ocean conservation.

**On 1 August 2021, the first ever MPA Day was celebrated with a virtual tour of marine protected areas across South Africa.** Well-known South African storyteller Gcina Mhlophe and her daughter, Khwezi Becker, performed a poem they had written about the ocean during the event.

While **#MPADay trended all day on Twitter**, a Twitter chat was also held with the support of prominent **social media influencers**, who participated on a pro bono basis.

All this was done to make South Africans realise they have many reasons to want to protect the oceans.

## Execution

The MPA Alliance believed that the easiest and most effective way to get the message out about the importance of marine conservation and MPAs was through a **public relations and social media campaign**.

Key spokespeople in the alliance were identified and media trained. Social media accounts for MPA Day were created on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to build a social media community ahead of the celebratory online event.



# Outcomes

The MPA Alliance's expectations for the campaign's impact were vastly exceeded.

**Remarkably, the event was run without a cent being spent.**

## Results:

- The **social media campaign**, run mostly on Twitter, achieved a reach of more than three million people and more than **67-million impressions**, with **2 585 individual mentions** in the week of **MPA Day**
- Total media coverage was worth over **R5-million (AVE of 1:1)**. We received **RI 393 044** in print media coverage, **R437 085** in broadcast coverage and **R3 390 108** in online coverage, for a total **media value of R5 220 237**
- The online event received more than **700 registrations**
- The photographic competition received more than **260 individual image entries** across three categories



 **700 +**  
Registrations

- **Not only did it raise awareness** of the importance of marine protected areas, but **MPA Day is also set to become an annual event**, extending to at least eight countries outside South Africa in 2022

This incredible result illustrates how, when a group of passionate and committed people come together in service of a laudable cause – in this case, the conservation and protection of our ocean ecosystems – anything is possible, even with zero budget to work with. We are thrilled that the momentum has now been set in motion and that MPA Day is poised to become a permanent fixture on the global conservation calendar.

