



# Public Opinion on Marine Protected Areas

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**ENVIRONICS**  
RESEARCH

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# INTRODUCTION

**Objectives.** Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the David Suzuki Foundation, West Coast Environmental Law Association and WWF-Canada commissioned this research to fulfill the following objectives:

- Establish a representative perspective of how Canadians view the ocean and ocean protection, including why they value the ocean;
- Identify and quantify provincial/regional variations in perspectives (particularly for Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador) and identify drivers of these differences;
- Identify specific issues that motivate support for conservation or prevent Canadians from being supportive of marine protection, with emphasis on economic and regional issues;
- Identify frames that motivate Canadians to care for, and act on, matters of ocean health; and,
- Establish if Canadians' perspectives of marine protection have changed since 2016.

**Methodology.** This report presents the findings of a survey conducted by Environics Research with a sample of 1,665 Canadians (aged 18 and over) from March 20 to April 4, 2019. A mixed-mode approach was used: 1,515 interviews were conducted with an online panel in the provinces, and 150 interviews were conducted by telephone in the Territories (residents of the three Territories are not sufficiently represented on online panels).

To ensure the final sample was representative of the Canadian population, quotas were set by region, age and gender, as well as by household income (in the provinces) and Indigenous identity (in the territories), and data were weighted to reflect population proportions per the 2016 Census.

Because an online survey is not a probability sample, a margin of sampling error cannot be reported.

Because online surveys are not based on a random probability sample, no formal estimates of sampling error can be calculated. Nonetheless, online surveys are a widely accepted methodology for conducting general population surveys provided they are well-designed and use a large, well-managed panel.

*In this report, results are expressed as percentages unless otherwise noted. Results may not add to 100% due to rounding or multiple responses. Where applicable, results are compared to previous surveys conducted for World Wildlife Fund-Canada in 2012 and 2016.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canadians' views about the importance of protecting oceans, and the value of MPAs in that effort, are strong and stable.

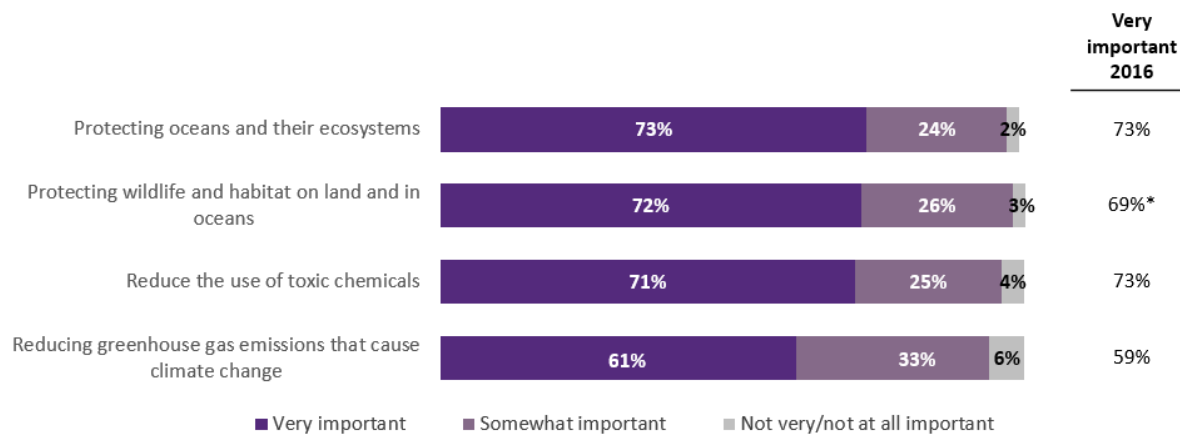
- The public continues to strongly value ocean protection as a way to reduce our impact on the environment, with three in four who say protecting oceans and their ecosystems is very important, unchanged from 2016.
- There is a considerable level of concern about ocean health and the perceived lack of efforts to protect it. While there is no consensus about the current state of ocean health, pessimism has increased since 2016. Half now say Canada's ocean health is only fair or poor (50%, up 12 percentage points since 2016), while the other half say it is excellent or good (50%, down 13). Regardless of their views about current conditions, the majority of Canadians believe ocean health has deteriorated over the past ten years (65%) and that Canada is not doing a particularly good job at protecting oceans (60% only fair or poor job).
- The public sees a wide range of threats to oceans, primarily from plastics and other pollution, but increasingly from climate change. By comparison, minorities see a serious threat from oil and gas and shipping activity. In terms of possible solutions for protecting oceans, Canadians rank the creation of ocean zones prohibiting industrial activity relatively high and place less emphasis on regulating shipping and banning oil and gas production. Although this appears to be a contradiction of sorts, it suggests the idea of protected areas (positive messaging) resonates with the public in a way that industry regulations and bans (negative messaging) does not.
- Importantly, the public's general orientation is unchanged since 2016, with three-quarters of Canadians strongly prioritizing protection of certain parts of our oceans so they can continue to support the economy and jobs in coastal communities, rather than allowing industrial activities in all parts of oceans.
- There continues to be limited knowledge of MPAs. Awareness of and self-reported familiarity with MPAs are low (42% have heard of them, 28% are very or somewhat familiar), and very few correctly identify the proportion of Canada's oceans designated as marine protected areas (even among those who have heard of MPAs). Moreover, only about one in ten are aware of the federal government's commitment to protect 10 percent of marine and coastal areas by 2020.
- Despite low familiarity, when MPAs are described to them, Canadians continue to express overwhelming support: 97 percent support designating certain areas of the ocean as marine protected areas, including more than six in ten (65%) who strongly support it (consistent with 2016). Strong support is particularly high in the Territories and the Atlantic provinces. MPA supporters continue to cite species and habitat survival as their main reason, as well as the idea that oceans are vital to our planet and future survival.

- As in 2016, there is a clear delineation in the activities that Canadians consider to be acceptable or not within MPAs. They remain most likely to say scientific research (92%), non-motorized water sports (84%) and eco-tourism (82%) should be allowed, followed by recreational fishing (66%). By comparison, strong majorities of eight in ten or more continue to oppose oil and gas activities, bottom trawling and dumping within MPAs.
- Canadians are mostly optimistic about the impacts MPAs will have on fish and marine species. They hold more mixed views about the impact an MPA would have on the local economy and jobs, but few predict a negative impact.
- Looking to the future, the public expresses strong support for increased ocean protection. Three-quarters of Canadians say the current amount of protected area (just under 8 percent) is not enough, and more than 9 in 10 support a new government commitment to protect 30 percent of Canada's oceans by 2030.
- In terms of Canada's priorities for marine protected areas, Canadians favour stronger standards of ocean protection within MPAs by a 2-to-1 margin over prioritizing the number and size of MPAs.
- These views and opinions are generally consistent across the country, with only modest variations by region or demographic subgroup. One group of particular relevance is those who depend on the ocean for their jobs (four percent of the sample). This group is more optimistic about ocean health and efforts to protect it. They believe we need to prioritize ocean protection to sustain the economy and jobs and hold positive views of MPAs; at the same time, strong support for MPAs is lower and they skew more strongly to the view that we should allow industrial activity in all parts of our oceans. Ultimately, their views are not diametrically opposite to the rest of the population, but nonetheless indicate softer support for MPAs.

# OCEAN PROTECTION

*Canadians continue to strongly value ocean protection as a way to reduce human impact on the environment.*

When asked about four potential ways to reduce our environmental impact, seven in ten or more say it is very important to protect oceans and their ecosystems (73%), protect wildlife and habitat on land and in oceans (72%) and reduce the use of toxic chemicals (71%). Slightly fewer (61%) place the same degree of importance on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In all four cases, very few say these actions are unimportant.



\* In 2016, statement was worded: *Protecting natural areas and wildlife habitat*

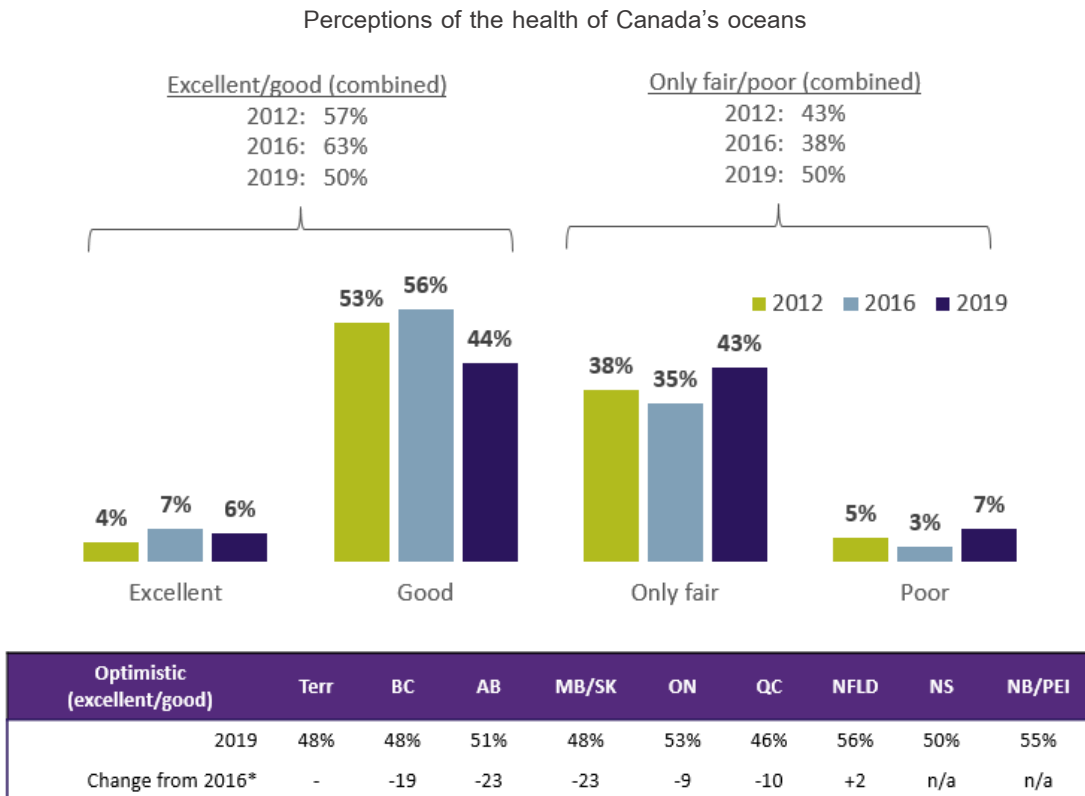
Q.1 Among the range of possible things humans can do to reduce our impact on the environment, how important do you consider each of the following?

The proportion who say protecting oceans is **very important** is higher:

- In NFLD (85%), Nova Scotia (85%) and the Territories (83%)
- Among women (78%)
- Among Canadians aged 60 and older (78%)
- Green (85%), NDP (79%) and Liberal (78%) supporters compared to Conservative supporters (65%).

*Perceptions of Canada's ocean health remains mixed, but pessimism has increased since 2016 with half now saying it is only fair or poor (up from four in ten).*

Public opinion is divided about the state of Canada's oceans, with half who say it is excellent or good (50%, down 13 points since 2016) and the other half who say it is only fair or poor (50%, up 12 points). The results also suggest relatively little certainty about ocean health: most ratings cluster in the middle (i.e., "good" or "only fair") with very few ratings at either end of the spectrum (i.e., "excellent" or "poor").



\* In 2016, data for NS, NB and PEI were combined

Q.2 Canada has 7.1 million square kilometres of ocean environment, an area equivalent to 70% of its land mass. From what you know or have heard, how would you rate the health of Canada's oceans, that is, those parts of the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans that border Canada's coastline?

Optimism about the current state of ocean health has declined substantially in most regions since 2016. As a result, mixed opinions are the norm across the country (i.e., no regions are significantly more optimistic or pessimistic than others).

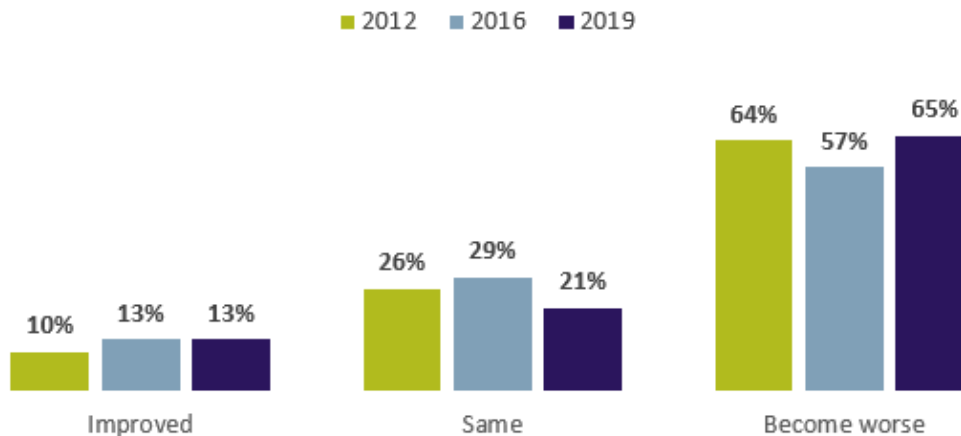
Optimism (i.e., rating ocean health as "excellent" or "good") is higher among:

- Those whose job is dependent on oceans (75%)
- Men (56%)
- Those with more education (52% with a postsecondary degree) and higher household incomes (55% at \$60K or more)
- Conservative (59%) and Liberal (56%) supporters compared to NDP (37%) and Greens (29%).

*A majority of Canadians continue to believe ocean health has deteriorated over the past decade.*

When asked their perceptions of Canada's ocean health compared to ten years ago, two-thirds (65%) say it has become worse, compared to one in five (21%) who believe it has stayed the same and 13 percent who say it has improved. These perceptions have not changed significantly since the question was first asked in 2012.

Health of Canada's oceans compared to ten years ago



	Terr*	BC	AB	MB/SK	ON	QC	NFLD	NS	NB/PEI	
Become worse	2019	53%	63%	66%	70%	62%	71%	67%	66%	62%
Change from 2016*		+1	+6	+16	+15	+5	+11	-1	n/a	n/a

\* In 2016, data for NS, NB and PEI were combined

Q.3 Compared to ten years ago, do you think the health of Canada's oceans has improved, worsened or stayed about the same?

Since 2016, residents of Alberta, Manitoba/Saskatchewan and Quebec are increasingly of the opinion that ocean health has deteriorated over the past decade. Across the country, this view is now less common in the Territories, where a higher-than-average proportion say ocean health has remained about the same (37%).

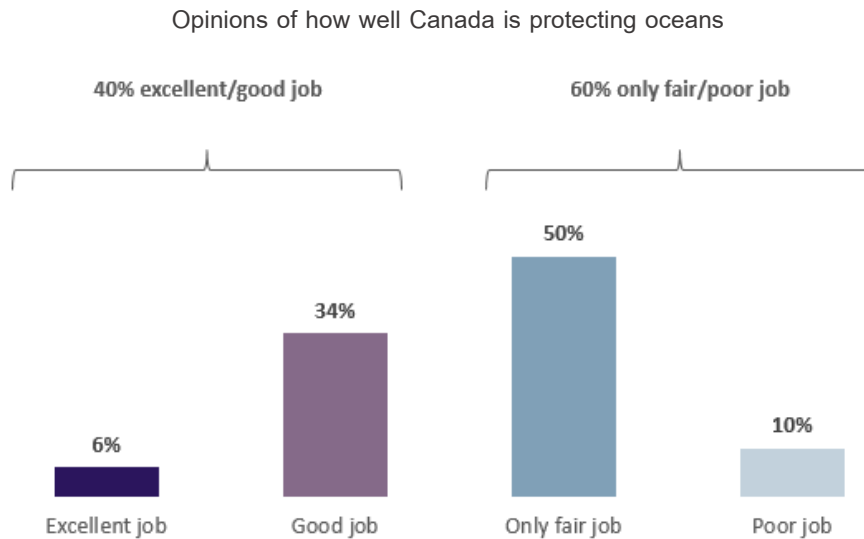
Belief that ocean health has deteriorated is higher among:

- Women (74%) and younger Canadians (73% aged 18-29)
- Those whose job does not depend on oceans (66%)
- Green (83%) and NDP (71%) supporters compared to Conservatives (61%) and Liberals (61%).



*As with opinions about overall ocean health, there is greater pessimism than optimism about Canada's efforts to protect oceans.*

Four in ten Canadians say the country is doing an excellent or good job at protecting our oceans, compared to six in ten who say we are doing an only fair or poor job. These results also suggest some uncertainty about Canada's performance, with most responses clustered in the middle (i.e., good or only fair).



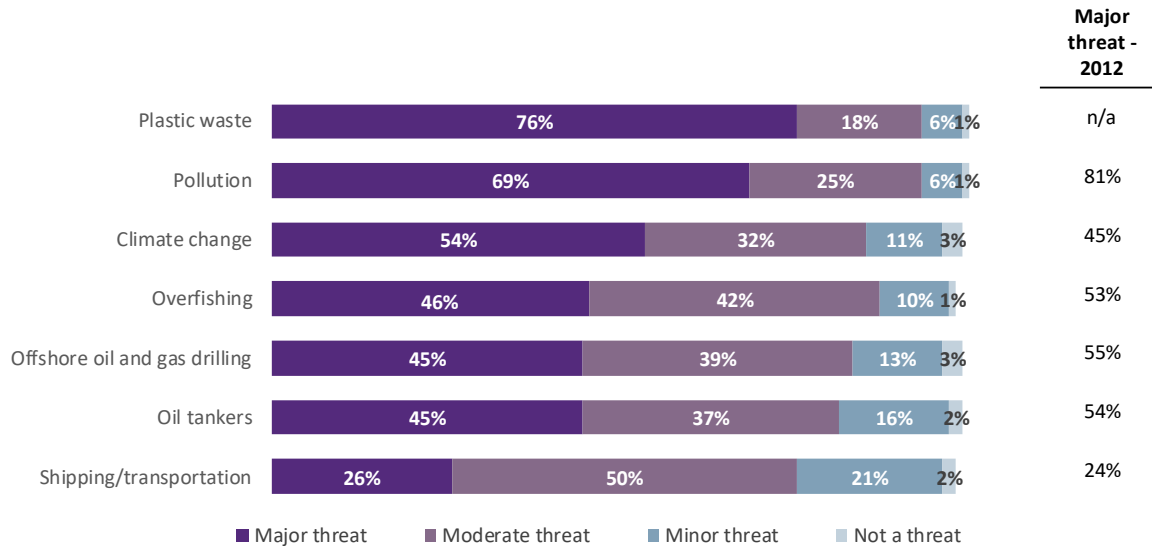
Q.5 Overall, how good a job do you think Canada is doing at protecting our oceans?

Majorities in all regions are pessimistic about Canada's efforts to protect our oceans. There are two groups where the majority are optimistic (i.e., excellent or good job): those whose job depends on oceans (68%) and those who were born outside Canada (53%).

*Plastic waste is ranked the greatest threat to oceans. Since 2012, climate change is emphasized over overfishing, offshore oil and gas and tankers.*

Canadians perceive a variety of threats facing Canada's oceans. When provided with a list of seven items, three-quarters or more say each is at least a moderate threat. The most serious threat is perceived to be plastic waste (76% major threat), followed by pollution (69%). Since 2012, the proportion who see a serious threat from climate change has increased (54%, up 9 points), while fewer than before see a major threat from overfishing (46%, down 9), offshore oil and gas (45%, down 10) and oil tankers (45%, down 9). The public is least likely to believe shipping is a major threat to Canada's oceans (26%).

Perceived threats to Canada's oceans



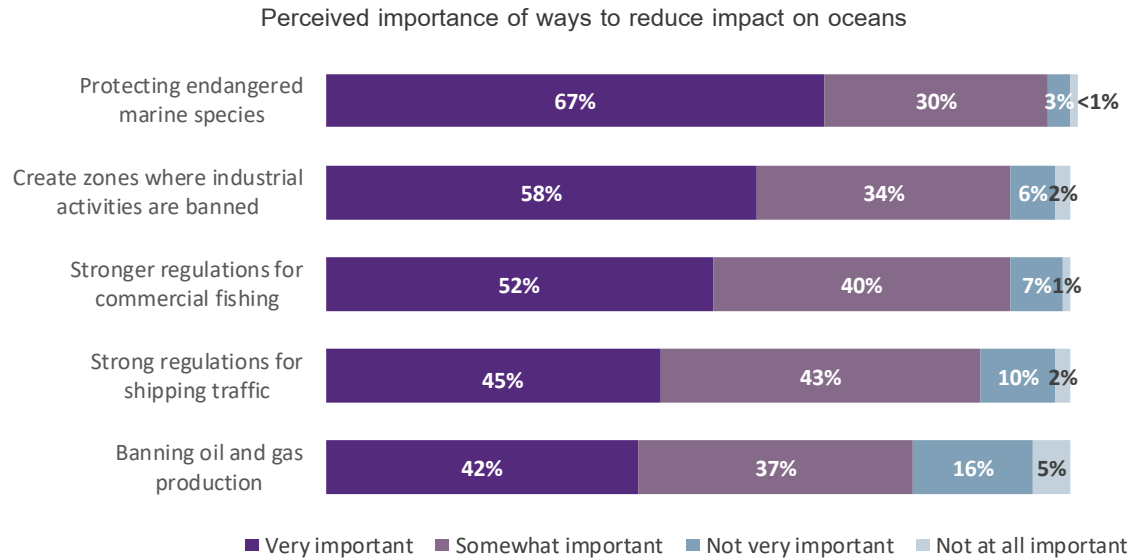
Q.4 To what extent do you believe each of the following is a threat to the health of Canada's oceans?

Perceptions that a major or moderate threat exists from most (but not all) of these sources is more common in Quebec and least common in Alberta. Together with Quebecers, residents of NFLD and PEI are among the most concerned about overfishing, while NS residents are among the most concerned about shipping activity.

Perceptions of threat tend to be consistently lower among those in the highest income bracket (\$100K+) and Conservative voters.

*In terms of possible solutions, the public places the greatest importance on protecting endangered species, followed by creating zones where industrial activities are banned.*

When asked about five possible things people can do to reduce our impact on oceans, Canadians see the value in all five efforts (three-quarters or more say each is at least somewhat important). The greatest priority is placed on protecting endangered marine species (67% very important), followed by creating zones banning industrial activities (58%). Marginally less emphasis is placed on shipping regulations (45%) and banning oil and gas production (42%) as a way to reduce our ocean impact.



Q.6 Among the range of possible things people can do to reduce our impact on oceans, how important do you consider each of the following?

Belief in the importance of zones banning industrial activity is highest in NS (69% very important), followed by Quebec (64%) and NFLD (62%).

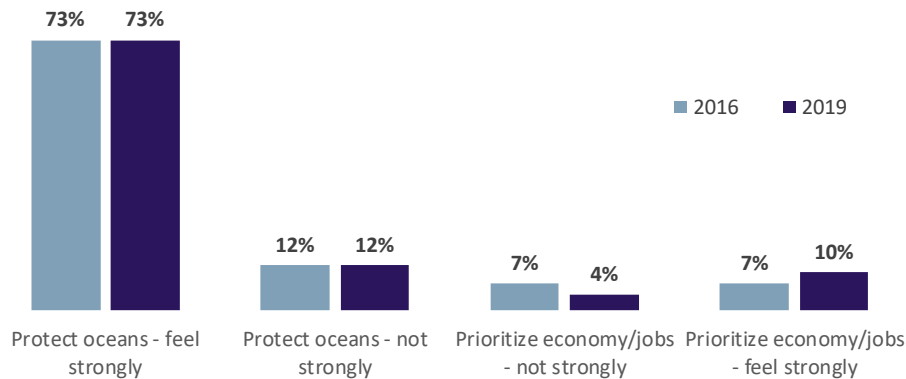
Most of the other ways to reduce our impact are considered more important in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces, and less important in Alberta. There is an exception, however, for banning oil and gas production in the ocean, where the perceived importance of this is *lowest* in NFLD (27%), Alberta (30%) and NB/PEI (31%) compared to other regions.

Generally, women and those with household incomes under \$100K+ are more likely to believe in the importance of these measures.

*As before, almost three in four Canadians feel strongly about prioritizing ocean protection to sustain the economy and jobs, rather than allowing industrial activities in all parts of our oceans.*

Arguments for or against environmental protection are often framed as a trade-off between the environment versus the economy. When asked about their general orientation, however, most Canadians prioritize protection of certain parts of our oceans so they can continue to support the economy and jobs in coastal communities (85%, including 73% who feel strongly), rather than prioritizing the economy and jobs and allowing industrial activities in all parts of oceans (14%, including 10% who feel strongly). These views are essentially unchanged since 2016.

#### Segmentation – Prioritize ocean protection or jobs/economy



Q.7 Which of these two statements is closer to your own opinion? [Some/other] people say that we need to prioritize the economy and jobs over environmental protection, and allow industrial activities in every part of our oceans. Other/some] people say that we need to protect parts of our oceans so they can continue to sustain the economy and jobs in coastal communities.

Q.8 Do you feel strongly or not so strongly that [INSERT Q7 RESPONSE: we need to prioritize the economy and jobs over environmental protection, and allow industrial activities in every part of our oceans / we need to protect parts of our oceans so they can continue to sustain the economy and jobs in coastal communities]?

All regions and demographic segments of the population prioritize ocean protection over the economy/jobs.

The segment that strongly prioritizes ocean protection skews to residents of the Atlantic provinces, women and older Canadians (60+).

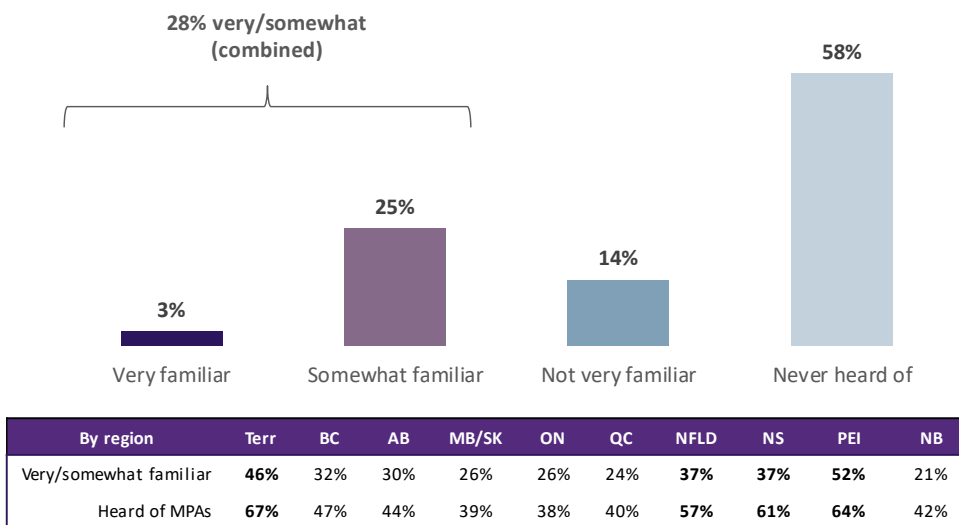
Only a minority strongly prioritize the economy, but it is more common in Alberta, among Conservative supporters and those who depend on the ocean for their job. As was the case in 2016, their orientation is in part linked to their stronger belief that oceans are doing fine: those who strongly prioritize the economy tend to have a more positive view of Canada's ocean health (74% excellent/good vs. 50% average) and to believe it has improved (26%, vs. 13% average).

# MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

*Four in ten Canadians have heard of MPAs, and over one-quarter are reasonably familiar with them.*

Survey respondents were asked if they had heard of marine protected areas, and if so, how familiar they are with them. Four in ten (42%) are aware of MPAs; more than one in four (28%) are at least somewhat familiar with them.

Awareness of/familiarity with Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)



Q.9 Have you ever heard of Marine Protected Areas?

Q.10 (IF YES) How familiar are you with Marine Protected Areas, what they are for and how they are established?

Both awareness of and familiarity (very or somewhat) with MPAs are higher among:

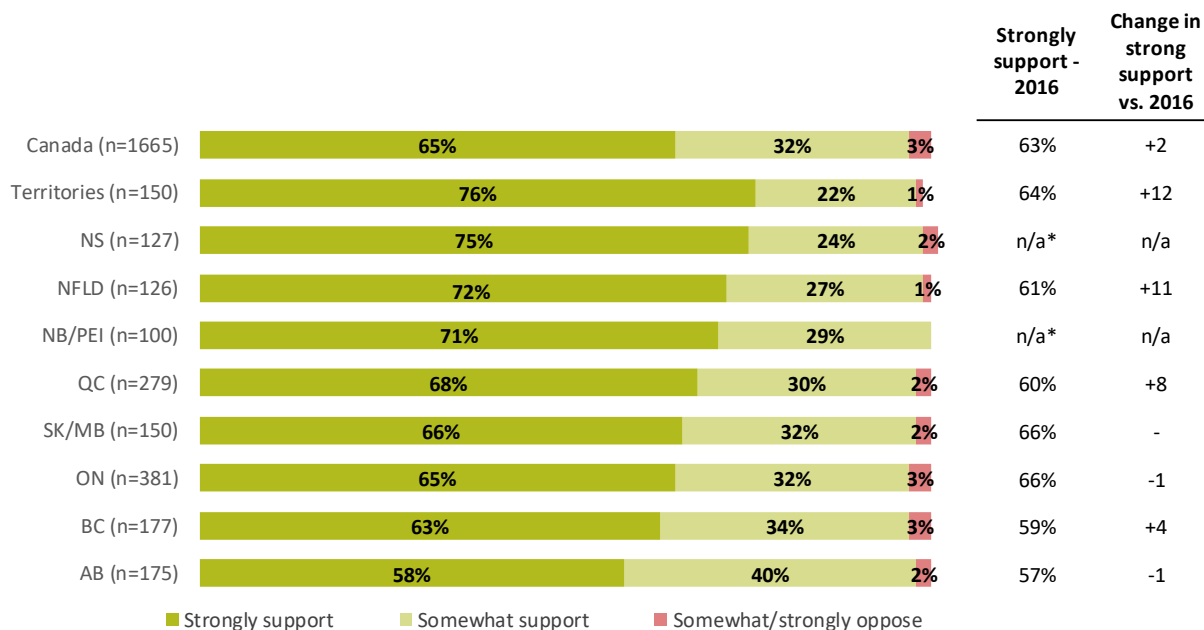
- Residents of the Territories, NFLD, NS and PE
- Men
- Canadians with a university education
- Those who depend on the ocean for their job
- Those with a positive view of ocean health

*There continues to be overwhelming support for marine protected areas in all regions of Canada, but particularly in the Territories and the Atlantic provinces.*

At this point in the survey, respondents were given a description of MPAs so they could provide informed opinions on the remaining questions.

When asked if they support or oppose designating certain areas of the ocean within Canada's territorial waters as marine protected areas, the public almost unanimously supports MPAs (97%), including two-thirds (65%) who strongly support them, which is essentially unchanged from 2016.

#### Support for marine protected areas



\* In 2016, data for NS, NB and PEI were combined

Q.11 A marine protected area or MPA is an area of the ocean where human activities such as commercial fishing or oil and gas development are more strictly regulated than in surrounding waters. MPAs ensure that marine ecosystems remain healthy, by conserving and protecting fish and other marine species and their habitats. Do you support or oppose Canada having certain areas of the ocean within Canadian territorial waters as marine protected areas?

Strong support for marine protected areas is most widespread in the Territories (76%) and the Atlantic provinces (75% in NS, 72% in NFLD and 71% in NB/PEI). It is also higher among:

- Women
- Those born in Canada
- Those who are pessimistic about ocean health
- Those who strongly prioritize ocean protection
- Green Party (84%), NDP (75%) and Liberal (69%) supporters; it is lower among Conservatives (54%)

*MPA supporters continue to cite species and habitat protection as their main reason, but also that oceans are vital to our planet/future.*

Those who strongly support MPAs are the most likely to give reasons related to protecting species and habitat. These are also the top reasons for those who somewhat support MPAs, but this group is also more likely than others to cite a general belief that “it is the right thing to do”.

**Reasons why support marine protected areas (top mentions)**  
*Among those who strongly/somewhat support MPAs (98% of total sample)*

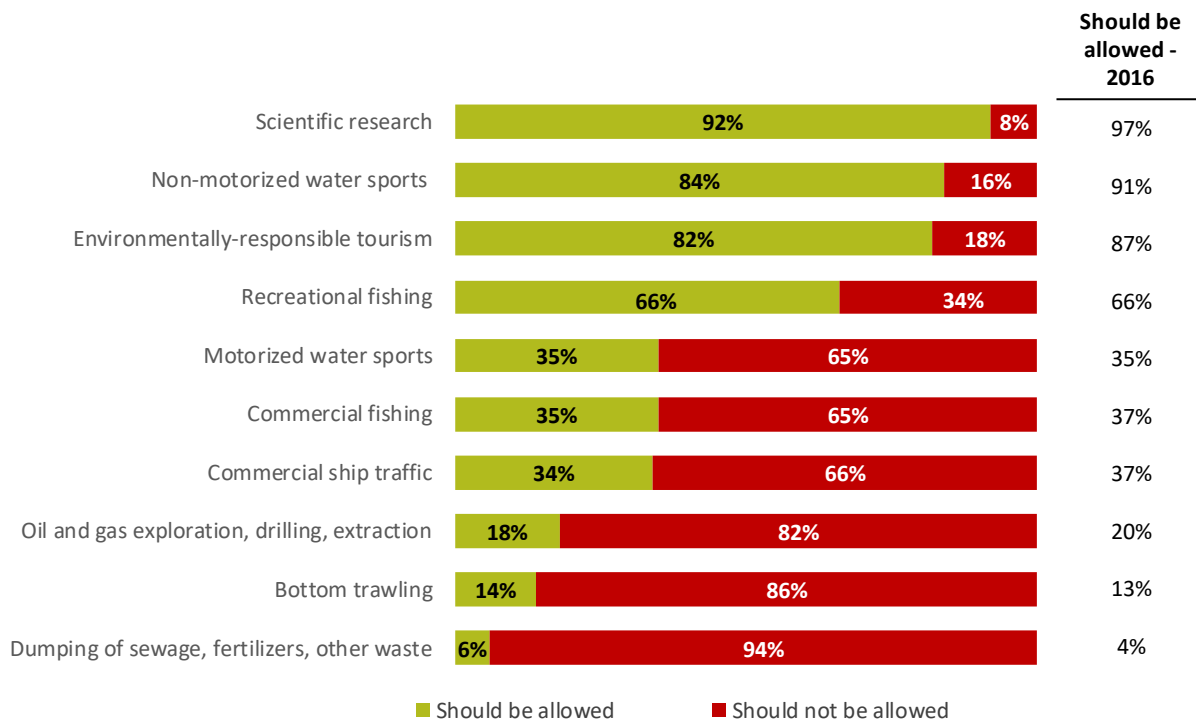
	2016	2019	Strongly support	Somewhat support
To protect ocean wildlife/habitat from destruction/depletion	27%	27%	31%	20%
Protect oceans similar to protecting land/parks	13%	24%	27%	18%
It is important/right thing to do	14%	14%	12%	17%
Important part of our ecosystem balance	15%	13%	15%	18%
To protect environment of our planet	15%	11%	11%	11%
Important for future generations/our children	14%	10%	11%	9%
Certain areas should be kept underdeveloped to assist in restoring oceans/to compare to developed areas	-	9%	8%	9%
To maintain a healthy planet	6%	7%	8%	5%
To maintain sustainable fisheries/prevent overfishing	5%	7%	8%	5%
To prevent species extinction	8%	6%	7%	4%
Good for Canadian economy/natural resources/tourism	7%	5%	5%	5%

Q.12 [IF STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT SUPPORT MPAS] Why do you support marine protected areas for Canada? (Based on subsample of n=1,629 respondents)

*Public views about the types of activities considered acceptable or unacceptable within MPAs remains largely consistent with 2016.*

As in 2016, Canadians clearly distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable activities within MPAs. They are most likely to say scientific research (92%), non-motorized water sports (84%) and eco-tourism (82%) should be allowed, followed by recreational fishing (66%). By comparison, strong majorities of eight in ten or more oppose oil and gas activities, bottom trawling and dumping within MPAs.

#### Activities that should vs. should not be allowed in MPAs



*Q.14 Please indicate if you believe each of the following activities should be allowed or should not be allowed in a marine protected area?*

The acceptability of these activities in MPAs is generally consistent across the population, but is typically more common among men, those whose job depends on oceans and those who strongly prioritize the economy.

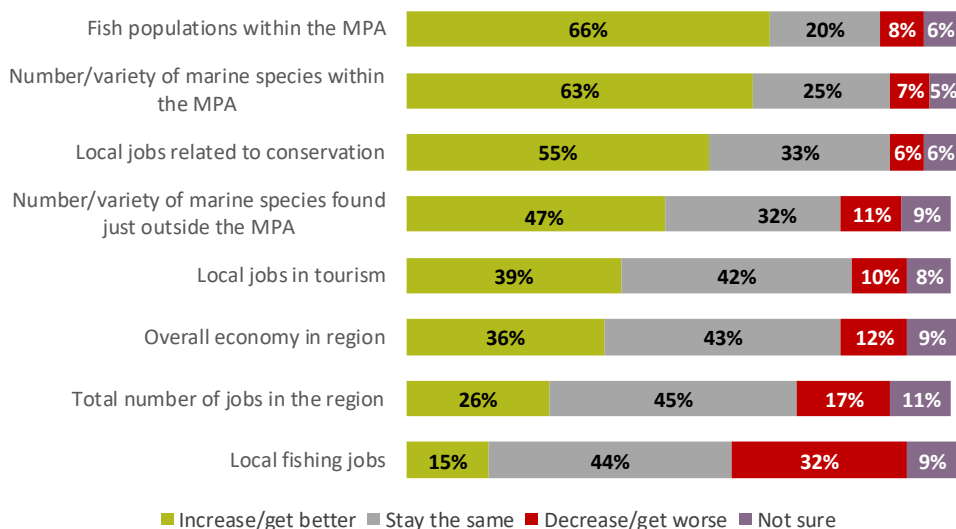
Only a minority in any segment support oil and gas activities, but this is more widespread in NFLD (27%) and Alberta (26%) and among those with a university education (21%) and Conservative supporters (21%). The acceptability of shipping traffic is also higher in NFLD (44%) and among Conservatives (45%).



*Canadians believe MPAs will benefit fish and marine species; there are mixed views about the impact on the economy and jobs, but few believe these would be harmed.*

What do Canadians think will be the impact of a new marine protected area? Majorities believe it would benefit fish populations (66% say these would increase) and the number and variety of marine species (63%) within the MPA, as well as local conservation jobs (55%). By comparison, opinions are divided about whether the economy and the number of non-conservation jobs would improve or stay the same. Relatively few see a negative impact, except in the case of local fishing jobs (32% say these will decrease).

#### Perceptions of impact from a new MPA



Q.15 Do you think each of the following is likely to increase, stay the same or decrease when a new marine protected area is created?

Q.16 And do you think the overall economy in the region is likely to get better, get worse or stay the same when a new marine protected area is created?

The pattern of results is largely consistent across the population, with a few exceptions. Optimism about growth of fish populations within an MPA is highest in NFLD and among older Canadians (60+), and lowest in Alberta. Compared to other regions, residents of the Territories are most optimistic that MPAs would create local jobs in conservation and tourism.

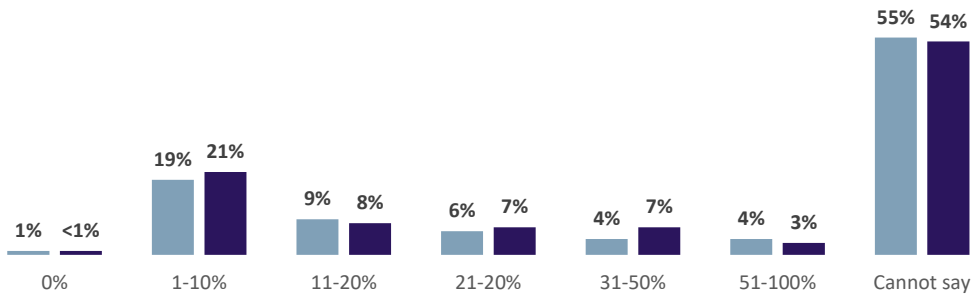
Both optimism and pessimism about many of these impacts is higher among those with a post-secondary education, while the view that things will stay the same is higher among those with less education.

Optimism about most of these impacts is lower among Conservative supporters, who in turn are more likely to say a new MPA would not change things or would have a negative effect - although only a minority hold the latter view.

*Awareness of the proportion of Canada's oceans currently designated as MPAs has not improved; the majority of Canadians remain unsure.*

There is very limited knowledge of how much of Canada's oceans are currently protected as MPAs, and this has not improved since 2016. The majority of Canadians (54%) cannot venture a guess, and another quarter believe (incorrectly) that ocean protection is more widespread (i.e., more than 10 percent of oceans) than is the case.

Expected percentage of Canada's oceans designated as MPAs



Q.11 What percentage of Canada's oceans do you think are currently designated as marine protected areas?

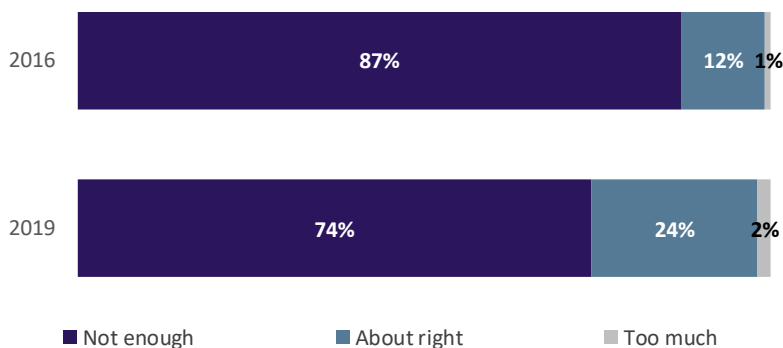
The proportion who are uncertain what percentage of Canada's oceans are marine protected areas is higher among:

- Residents of Manitoba/Saskatchewan (60%)
- Canadians aged 60 and older (66%)
- Those without a postsecondary education (63%)
- Those who have never heard of MPAs (69%)

*Most Canadians say eight percent protected area is insufficient, although the proportion who believe it is about right has increased since 2016 (when there was only one percent protection).*

Currently, just under eight percent of Canada's oceans are subject to special protection by law that limits the types of activities allowed. The large majority (74%) of Canadians continue to say this is not enough.

Is 8 percent protected area too much, about right or not enough?



*2016: Currently, around one percent of Canada's oceans are designated as marine protected areas. Do you think that is too much, about right, or not enough?*

*2019: Currently, just under eight percent of Canada's oceans are subject to special protection by law that limits the types of activities allowed. Do you think this amount of protected area is too much, about right or not enough?*

The proportion who say eight percent protected area is not enough is higher among:

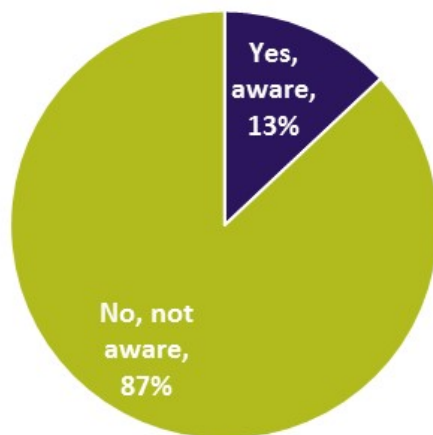
- Residents of NS/PEI (95%)
- Women (81%)
- Those without a university degree (78%)
- Those who strongly prioritize ocean protection (82%)

These views do not vary significantly by federal party support.

*There is very limited awareness of Canada's commitment to 10 percent protection by 2020.*

Ten percent of Canadians say they are aware the federal government made an international commitment to protect 10 percent of Canada's oceans by 2020. Among those whose job depends on the ocean, more than six in ten (64%) are aware.

Aware of commitment to 10 percent protection by 2020

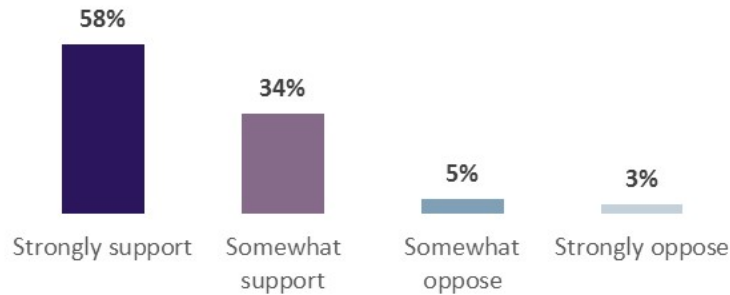


Q.20 In 2010, the federal government made an international commitment to increase the amount of Canada's protected marine and coastal areas to 10 percent by 2020. Before today, were you aware of this commitment?

*There is strong support for a new commitment to 30 percent protection by 2030.*

Looking ahead, nine in ten Canadians support a new commitment to 30 percent by 2030, including more than half (58%) who strongly support it.

Support for new commitment to 30 protection by 2030



*Q.21 Canada is on track to meet the international commitment of protecting 10 percent of our marine and coastal areas by 2020. However, new research suggests 10 percent of protected areas is not enough to effectively protect marine species and habitats. Do you support or oppose a new commitment to protecting 30 percent of Canada's oceans by 2030?*

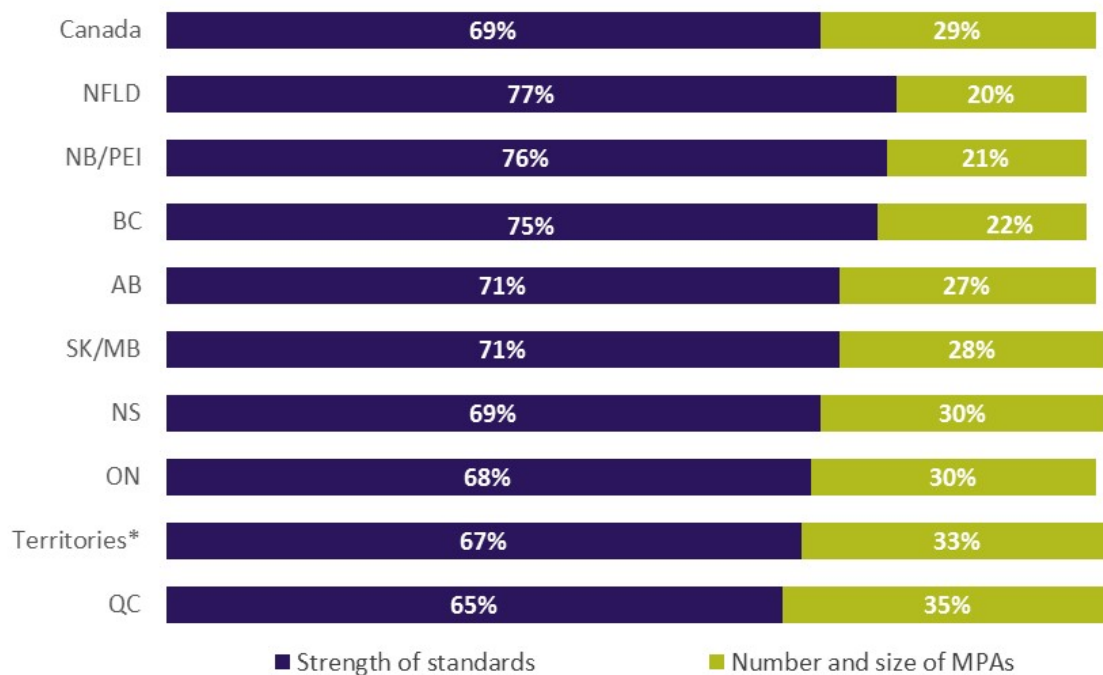
Strong support for a 30 percent commitment is higher among:

- Women
- Those in the lowest income bracket (<\$40K)
- Those who strongly prioritize ocean protection
- Those who strongly support MPAs
- Green Party (78%), NDP (64%) and Liberal (63%) supporters, compared to Conservatives (46%)

Canadians generally favour strong standards for MPAs over more/larger MPAs where standards are not that strong.

When asked what the priority should be when creating new MPAs, Canadians place greater importance on strong standards (69%) by more than a two-to-one margin over prioritizing the number and size of MPAs (29%).

Which is more important: strength of MPA standards or number/size of MPAs?



\* Excludes 22% who don't know/gave no answer in the Territories

Q.22 In your view, which of the following is more important for Canada to consider when creating new marine protected areas? The strength of the standards of marine protection within existing and new marine protected areas OR The number and size of marine protected areas, even if the standards of marine protection within them are not that strong.

Only a minority in any region or demographic segment favour focusing on the number and size of MPAs, although this is higher in Quebec (35%), those under age 45 (33%), and those in the lowest income bracket (34%).