



10 frequently asked questions about the Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW) Protocol

1. What is the SPAW Protocol?

The SPAW Protocol is one of the three Protocols of the Cartagena Convention. The Convention was adopted in 1983, while the SPAW Protocol was adopted on 18 January 1990 and entered into force on 18 June 2000. The SPAW Protocol follows an ecosystem-based management approach and provides a unique legal framework for the conservation of the region's coastal and marine biodiversity. The SPAW Protocol is also recognised as an important tool for supporting Governments in implementing their commitments to biodiversity under international agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention.

2. What is the Cartagena Convention?

Sustainable management of sea and coastal resources and protection of critical habitats through concerted regional cooperation is vital to the Caribbean region. Having acknowledged this, the countries of the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) adopted the Cartagena Convention (Convention for the Protection and Development of Marine Environment of the Wider Caribbean Region) in 1983. It is the only legally binding regional agreement for the protection of the Caribbean Sea. Twenty-six out of twenty-eight countries have ratified the Convention to date. The Convention focuses on issues such as land-based sources of pollution, dumping of waste at sea, pollution from ships, biodiversity protection, and airborne pollution. The Cartagena Convention is supported by three technical protocols developed to further implement it: Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW 1990), Pollution from Land-Based Sources and Activities (LBS 1999), and Cooperation in Combating Oil Spills (1983).

3. What are the main objectives of the SPAW Protocol?

The SPAW Protocol aims to:

- Protect, preserve, and sustainably manage areas of ecological value, such as coral reefs, mangroves and seagrass beds, while promoting their contribution to ecological health and economic well-being.
- Protect endangered and critical species by implementing conservation measures to safeguard threatened species and prevent others from becoming endangered, ensuring the recovery and restoration of their populations.

4. How many governments are parties to the SPAW Protocol?

The SPAW Protocol came into force on 18 June 2000.

As of January 2025, the Protocol has been ratified or acceded to by 19 countries (and their territories): The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, France (Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin), Grenada, Guyana, Honduras, the Netherlands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint-Eustacius, Sint Maarten), Nicaragua, Panama, Saint Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States (U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto-Rico), and Venezuela.

5. How does the SPAW Protocol work?

The actions developed in support of the SPAW Protocol are implemented within the framework of biennial plans of work, prepared in collaboration with Parties, reviewed by SPAW's Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee, and formally adopted during the SPAW Conference of the Parties that takes place every two years. These work plans define step-by-step priority actions that SPAW Parties wish to focus on at national and regional levels. Through regional cooperation and coordination, Parties are expected to progressively reach the Protocol's objectives and ensure the proper application of its measures.

6. What are some of the main obligations following ratification or accession?

According to the terms of the Protocol and in accordance with their own laws and regulations, the Parties must take measures to protect, preserve, and sustainably manage the areas that need protection, as well as endangered animal and plant species in their territories. Regarding species, these obligations are based on three annexes:

- Annex I includes threatened or endangered plant species for which any form of destruction or disruption (picking, gathering, uprooting, cutting, possession, trade, etc.) must be banned in order to guarantee their protection and, if necessary, their recovery.
- Annex II lists threatened or endangered animal species for which any form of destruction or disruption (capture, possession, killing, trade, etc.) must be banned for their protection and recovery.
- Annex III includes a list of animal and plant species for which special measures must be taken to ensure their protection and recovery while authorising and regulating the use of these species.





Countries can also propose Protected Areas to be listed under the SPAW Protocol according to specific guidelines. There are no direct financial obligations for the Parties. Governments contribute on a voluntary basis to the Caribbean Trust Fund regardless of their status within the Convention and its protocols.

7. How can countries get assistance to implement the obligations of the SPAW Protocol?

UNEP CAR/RCU, as the Secretariat to the Cartagena Convention and its protocols, provides countries with guidance, scientific/technical information, and expertise to meet the SPAW Protocol's obligations. In liaison with the SPAW Regional Activity Center (SPAW-RAC), it also assists countries in developing new projects and activities and sourcing funding for their implementation.


By ratifying the SPAW Protocol, countries can receive support for:

- Management of protected areas
- Public education and awareness
- Reviews and updates to, and/or development of, national policy, legislation and regulations
- Sustainable management of species and critical habitats, including through technical assistance and scientific advice
- Development of new partnerships
- Development of management and/or restoration plans for specific species and ecosystems
- Implementation of local/national solutions, including through nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based management approaches

8. What are the main benefits for countries from ratification or accession?

Through the Programme, the Cartagena Convention Secretariat:

- Provides direct assistance for the conservation and management of species as well as use of coastal and marine habitats and resources
- Provides opportunities for new partnerships and enhanced coordination of technical assistance, research, education and capacity building for coastal and marine resource management
- Supports resource mobilization and access to funding from donors including through the development and implementation of projects and activities
- Provides technical assistance and expertise through the SPAW-RAC, established in 2000 in Guadeloupe for the implementation of SPAW activities at the request of the parties and other partner organizations (e.g., Regional Activity Networks - RANs)



9. How does a country ratify/accede to the SPAW Protocol?

- The Ministry of Foreign or External Affairs obtains a certified copy of the SPAW Protocol from the Government of Colombia, the Depository for the SPAW Protocol, for internal review.
- Once reviewed and approved through national processes, the Ministry of Foreign or External Affairs should deposit the instrument of accession with the Government of Colombia as the Depository.

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10. Which partners are involved in the SPAW Protocol?

Many partners and stakeholders are involved in the implementation of the SPAW programme, including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) through the Cartagena Convention Secretariat and the SPAW-RAC. Other non-profit observer organizations and networks like the Caribbean Marine Protected Areas Management Network and Forum (CaMPAM), the SPAW-listed MPA Network, the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI), and the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST), support the work of SPAW. Experts on protected areas, species (e.g., marine mammals, sea turtles, sharks), and exemptions also help implement the SPAW programme through designated working groups.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE SPAW PROTOCOL:

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