

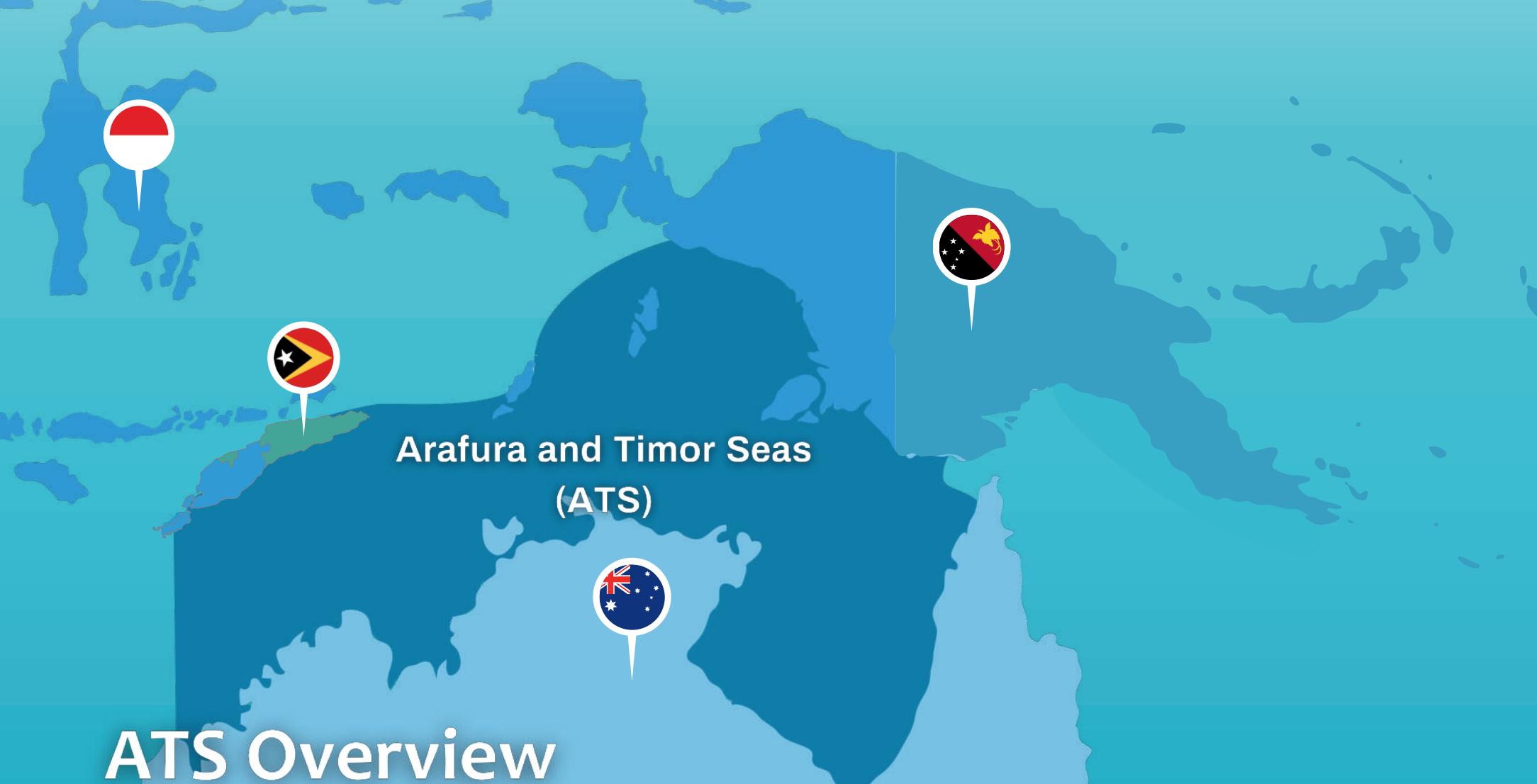


A T S E A

ARAFURA AND TIMOR SEAS ECOSYSTEM ACTION



ENHANCING MARINE BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION THROUGH EFFECTIVE AREA-BASED MANAGEMENT IN THE ARAFURA AND TIMOR SEAS REGION



ATS Overview

The Arafura and Timor Seas (ATS) are tropical waters shared by Australia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Timor-Leste, located at the intersection of two major Large Marine Ecosystems: the Northern Australian Shelf in the south and the Indonesian Sea in the north. The region spans more than **167 million ha**.

The region supports major fisheries, holds vast oil and gas reserves, and serves as a key corridor for international shipping. These resources provide essential livelihoods and contribute an estimated **USD 7.3 billion** annually to the regional economy.

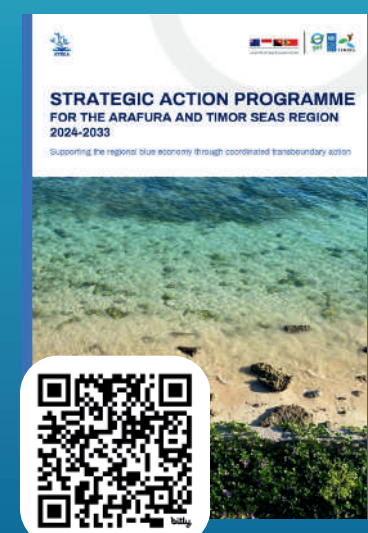
However, the region is threatened by transboundary environmental issues - marine plastic pollution including abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gears (ALDFG), oil spills, illegal fishing, and the decline of endangered, threatened, and protected (ETP) species, which are exacerbated by climate change, gender and social inequalities in some areas, and inefficient governance and management structures for addressing transboundary issues in the region.

Goals and Objectives

To tackle transboundary issues in the ATS region, the ATS countries have agreed to formalise long-term cooperation for the sustainable management of their shared waters.

From Projects to a Lasting Program

Building on the achievements of two GEF/UNDP-supported projects, ATSEA-1 (2010–2014) and ATSEA-2 (2019–2024), the ATS countries signed the **Sydney Declaration on 5 December 2024**. This milestone marked the transition into the long-term ATSEA Program, and the formal adoption of:



The ATS Strategic Action Programme (SAP) 2024–2033, which addresses transboundary and cross-cutting issues.



A Regional Governance Mechanism (RGM) to coordinate implementation across countries

Protecting Species and Habitats

One of the four core components of the SAP focuses on increasing the resilience of endangered, threatened, and protected (ETP) species and critical habitats by:

- Enhancing collaborative management of transboundary and migratory ETP species
- Strengthening ecosystem resilience to climate change through area-based management, including:
 - Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)
 - Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs)

ATSEA Path to 30x30 Target

Through ATSEA-2, **764,564.9 ha** of landscapes and seascapes in the ATS are under improved biodiversity management. By implementing SAP 2024 – 2033, the ATSEA Program plans to further contribute to 30x30 by achieving the following targets:

Governance

- A new regional commitment to achieve 20-30% of ATS under effective protection
- 70,000 km² of new MPAs gazetted and 10,000 km² of new OECMs created
- At least one new RPOA developed for priority transboundary ETP species/species group
- Traditional Ecological Knowledge integrated into management of 3+ MPA/OECM sites and 1+ ETP species/group

Ecology

- 25-30% of ATS critical habitats and ecosystems under effective area-based protection
- Management effectiveness increases of at least 25% in at least 25% of MPAs in ATS
- At least 25% reduction in identified threats for prioritised ETP species
- Stable long-term trend in sea turtle nest counts/population census at selected sites

Management

- Implementation of the updated, climate proof MPA Network Design (including MPAs and OECMs)
- Delivery of regional priority actions in Sea Turtle RPOA and new RPOA for other species
- Supplementary and sustainable livelihoods in MPA/OECM areas

Key Conservation Activities Across the ATS

Through the ATSEA-2 Project, countries in the ATS region worked together to strengthen knowledge and skills for marine conservation at both the local and regional levels.



Science-Based Planning for Protection

Assessments were conducted to map biodiversity profile, estimate economic value, and review sea turtle current status. These formed the foundation for regional guidance on Marine Protected Area (MPA) establishment and sea turtle protection.

Supporting Local Action

In Merauke, Indonesia and Manufahi–Manatuto, Timor-Leste, the project carried out ecological and socioeconomic assessments, followed by consultations with communities and government agencies to support the establishment of new MPAs.

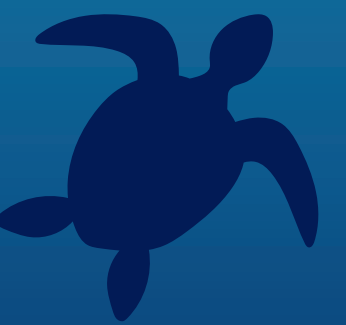


Improving Existing MPA Management

In Southeast Aru (Indonesia) and Nino Konis Santana National Park (Timor-Leste), the project helped review MPA management plans, delivered monitoring and management training, and ran community awareness activities to improve management effectiveness.

Training for ETP Species Conservation

To support the conservation of ETP species, the project held training sessions and regional exchanges. These activities built the capacity of conservation practitioners and local fishers, focusing on sea turtle conservation and best practices for handling ETP species bycatch.



Impact Stories from the ATS

Building a Regional Network for Marine Protection



In 2022, ATS countries endorsed the Regional ATS MPA Network Design, the first of its kind in the region. It identified:

- 93** Existing and proposed MPAs, allocated in National Marine Spatial Plans, covering **271,588 km²**
- 20** Areas of Interest for future MPAs, covering **29,385 km²**

The design considers ecological connectivity, fishery routes, ETP species migration, and shared threats like overfishing and climate change, ensuring science-based and regionally coordinated protection.

Advancing Sea Turtle Protection



In 2022, ATS countries also endorsed the Regional Plan of Action (RPOA) for Sea Turtle Protection, supported by the development of a Regional Status Report on Sea Turtles. The report provides essential data for coordinated protection efforts across national boundaries.

Supporting Local MPAs Across Borders

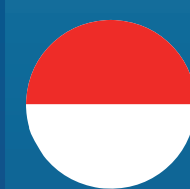
ATSEA-2 collaborated with local governments and communities in Aru and Merauke (Indonesia) and Lautem and Manufahi (Timor-Leste) to strengthen both existing and new MPAs. For existing MPAs, the project supported efforts to improve management effectiveness. As a result, Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT) scores showed significant progress:

- Southeast Aru MPA, Indonesia** - The scores improved from **39 (2019) to 72 (2023)**
- Nino Konis Santana National Park, Timor-Leste** - The scores rose from **24 (2019) to 46 (2023)**

Efforts included updating management plans, building capacity through training, supporting livelihood activities, and engaging communities through outreach and awareness.

Establishing New Protected Areas

The project also contributed to the formal establishment of new MPAs:



In 2023, the Kolepom Island MPA was officially established in Merauke, Indonesia, with a total area of **356,337.9 hectares**



In Timor-Leste, preparations for a new MPA in Manufahi–Manatuto are underway, with a proposed area of **51,000 hectares**

Mobilising Communities for Conservation in Timor-Leste

In Com, Lautem Municipality, a pilot project integrated sea turtle protection with ecotourism and alternative livelihoods. Even after the ATSEA-2 Project concluded, some community members have continued voluntary sea turtle conservation and monitoring, demonstrating strong local ownership and impact.

Empowering Coastal Communities

A total of **280 people (203 men and 77 women)** benefited from **10 trainings** held at regional and local levels. The sessions covered MPA management, sea turtle conservation, ETP species, ecosystem and habitat data collection, and alternative livelihoods around MPAs.

Limitations

Most assessments took place during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), limiting field surveys and primary data collection. Despite this, they used the best available data and practices. The new SAP includes plans to refine these assessments, update the regional MPA Network design to include OECMs, and add more data on ETP and migratory species. Managing MPAs remains challenging due to their remote locations and logistical barriers.