BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES:

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDANCE FOR OIL & GAS OPERATIONS IN MARINE ENVIRONMENTS

Pippa Howard, Guy Parker, Twyla Holland, David Marsh, Nicky Jenner & Erin Parham

BUSINESS & BIODIVERSITY PROGRAMME
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Operating in a marine context

Oceans cover more than 70% of the Earth’s surface and harbour astounding biodiversity, from the better-known coral reefs and migratory mammals and birds to the recently discovered chemosynthetic communities around hydrothermal vents. They are responsible for producing over half of the oxygen in our atmosphere, as well as absorbing carbon. Over three billion people depend on marine resources for food, and the coastal environment supports the livelihoods of more than 200 million people. The vital contribution made by marine habitats to biodiversity and ecosystem services is increasingly widely acknowledged, but the threats posed by pollution, overfishing and infrastructure development continue to grow. Meanwhile, rising energy demands are inducing the extractive industries to focus on offshore oil and gas reserves, putting additional pressure on the marine environment.

Best practice

Currently, over one third of the world’s oil and gas is sourced from offshore sites, and that figure is expected to increase. With offshore oil and gas developments and their effects on marine biodiversity and ecosystem services subject to increasing scrutiny at local, national and international levels, reputational, operational and financial risk are a growing concern. Until now, however, guidelines on how to apply, monitor and enforce industry standards and policy have been in short supply.

It is in this context that Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has produced comprehensive guidance to help oil and gas sector operators minimise their impact on marine biodiversity and ecosystem services. FFI’s Good Practice Guidance is designed to enable operators to identify and take full account of marine biodiversity and ecosystem services, determine their potential impact on these resources, and take appropriate steps to avoid or reduce any damage, to make good the affected area or, where that is deemed impractical, to offset their impact. This is the first guidance document to address the impact of oil and gas extraction specifically in the marine environment.
Guiding principles

FFI’s Good Practice Guidance identifies impacts and proposes mitigation methods for all stages of the oil and gas project cycle, including shipping and ports, seismic surveys, exploration drilling, field development, production and operations, and decommissioning. For each phase of the project cycle a table describes the activities, potential associated impacts and a range of recommended avoidance and minimisation measures.

The sections dedicated to restoration and offsetting – and the opportunities and challenges these present in a marine context – include information on the latest research, and draw on case studies from a broad spectrum of habitats including mangroves, seagrass, coral reefs and pelagic zones. Consideration is given to the potential for marine biodiversity offsetting or compensation to address the residual impacts of project development that cannot be avoided or made good through restoration.

The guidance is evidence-based and brings together the best available science and practice – as well as the latest innovative ideas – drawn from leading oil and gas companies, impact assessment practitioners, finance sector experts, and marine biodiversity and ecosystem specialists. It provides practical, real-world examples of how impact management can be effectively incorporated into commercial work phases.

Target audiences

This guidance is indispensable for oil and gas operators, particularly those working in sensitive, biologically rich marine environments that require a commitment to achieving a net gain or avoiding a net loss in biodiversity. It is also a vital tool for all other individuals or organisations connected with oil and gas activities in a marine context, including impact assessment practitioners, marine biodiversity and ecosystem service specialists, lender banks and auditors, policy makers and regulatory agencies.
Digital platform

FFI’s Good Practice Guidance is initially available as a pdf document, but a digital platform is currently in development. This globally accessible online platform will be designed to provide a ‘one-stop shop’ for impact mitigation in the marine environment.

The digital platform will encourage and enable oil and gas businesses to integrate biodiversity management into their own workflows and practices. By setting out a coherent, uniform and readily accessible set of recommendations, it aims to encourage a consistent approach to marine impact management rather than the existing, piecemeal execution of good practice advice.

The resource will support corporate reputational management activities by allowing organisations to elevate their commitment beyond the level of basic compliance and thereby demonstrate that they are industry leaders in adopting current best practice standards.

It will also instil greater confidence among banks and other lenders, reducing ethical ambiguity and minimising the risk of association with organisations that may have been historically associated with poor environmental practices.

In the longer term, this initiative aims to significantly increase sector-wide commitment to the global management of marine biodiversity.

For more information, please contact:

Guy Parker  guy.parker@fauna-flora.org
Pippa Howard  pippa.howard@fauna-flora.org

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