

# Counting the Uncountable

Conservation International's "Ocean Health Index" is misleading and unfit to provide the basis for action towards improving the health of the world's oceans

Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts" is a famous quote sometimes attributed to Albert Einstein and sometimes said to originate with the sociologist, William Bruce Cameron.

Conservation International (CI), the nonprofit environmental organization, has, in its document titled *Ocean Health Index* (available at [www.conservation.org](http://www.conservation.org) or [www.oceanhealthindex.org](http://www.oceanhealthindex.org)), spent a lot of time and resources to try and disprove the sentiment behind this quote.

how close or far each country is to a balanced use of the sea."

The "Index by Country" page states: "The Index measures the global state of the world's oceans. The scores tell us what is working and what needs attention. An index score for 221 countries and territories is calculated based on their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Each EEZ is evaluated by the 10 public goals and is globally ranked according to the average of its 10 goal scores. Compare countries and explore the interactive map or tables below." (see Table)

It is further stated: "Overall scores and individual goal scores are directly comparable between all countries." "A healthy ocean sustainably delivers a range of benefits to people both now and in the future. The Index evaluates the world's oceans according to 10 public goals that represent key benefits of healthy marine ecosystems."

The final results rank Heard and McDonald Island as No. 1 and Iceland as No. 156. Note that Heard and McDonald Island is uninhabited. Iceland, which otherwise is well-recognized for clean waters, well-managed fisheries and good living conditions, is ranked 156th, well beyond Western Sahara (60th) and Bangladesh (112th). Puzzling? Rest assured, there are more surprises ahead. The uninhabitable Clipperton Island in the Pacific scores only a rank of 209, far from the ideal of a "balanced use of the sea".

## Public goals

Consider some of the specifics of the 10 public goals in the Country Rankings: Under 'Coastal Protection' (preserving habitats that safeguard shores: "This goal measures the

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The problem is not with CI's attempt or its report but that many use the result as a reference for "how it is". Which it is not, as I shall attempt to show with some random examples and comments on the rankings made in the report, which I found hilariously entertaining.

The lead scientific partners in CI's enterprise are the University of Santa Barbara's National Centre for Ecological Synthesis and Analysis and the University of British Columbia's "Seas Around Us" project.

The front page of the document states the single goal: "Establish a new world standard for measuring ocean health". It adds further: "Scientists and marine experts calculated sustainable standards for the many ways we use the ocean, and offer hard numbers to show

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condition and extent of habitats that protect the coasts against storm waves and flooding”), leading the pack are Bangladesh, Benin, Belgium, Netherlands and a few more with a score of 100, while the United States (US) ranks 61 and Iceland, 115. Iceland’s ranking can be explained by the fact that a country that randomly lets volcanoes throw ashes and hot lava down on its coast has to emerge with a low score.

Under ‘Artisanal Fishing Opportunities’ (ensuring access to artisanal fishing to local population: “This goal measures whether people who need to fish on a small, local scale have the opportunity to do so” and/or “This goal measures the degree to which a nation permits or encourages artisanal fishing compared to the demand for fishing opportunities”), Amsterdam Island and Saint Paul Island, Kerguelen Archipelago and South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands lead with scores of 100.

Apparently, the opportunities for artisanal fishing are best in these uninhabited islands. What a pity no one lives there, though there are staff running research stations. With no “demand for fishing opportunities” and no “permits or encouragements”, it doesn’t take a mathematical genius or an Einstein to award a score of 100, which, as promised by CI, is “a hard number offered”. How meaningful is the moot point, though.

Jan Mayen Island in the Northeast Atlantic scores 27 but unfortunately it lacks a harbour, which limits opportunities for artisanal fishing. There are only around 20 people living there who run a meteorology station.

Under ‘Clean Waters’ (minimizing pollution, a goal that measures contaminants by trash, nutrients, pathogens and chemicals), the winner is, again, Heard and McDonald Islands with a top score of 100, together with Kerguelen Archipelago, Bouvet Island and some other uninhabited (and uninhabitable) islands. The United Kingdom is ranked ninth, Egypt, 34, the US, 62 and Benin, 219.

The irony is delicious: Benin is among the best in the world for preserving coastal habitats and

safeguarding shores, and among the worst in polluting the same areas.

Under ‘Coastal Livelihood and Economics’ (sustaining jobs and thriving coastal economies: “This goal measures a country’s ability to maintain coastal livelihoods and economies in 10 marine sectors, from shipping and transportation to wave and tidal energy”), Albania, Bangladesh, Gambia and Liberia are the nations with a top score of 100.

Haiti scores only 40, understandable perhaps in the wake of the problems the country is struggling with after the earthquake. Much worse is the situation in the Netherlands, which is ranked 120, and must clearly put in substantial efforts to clamber up to the level of Liberia.

Norway, with a coastal population struggling to meet the petrol consumption costs on the family’s three cars, scores a rank of 127, slightly ahead of Jan Mayen Island, whose rank of 128 is well-deserved since no one lives there.

**Table: Top 20 countries by rank (Ocean Health Index)**

Selected Countries	Rank	Score
Heard and McDonald Islands	1	94
Saba	2	90
Howland Island and Baker Island	3	88
Kerguelen Islands	4	86
Sint-Eustatius	5	85
Phoenix Group	6	84
Bonaire	7	84
Prince Edward Islands	8	83
Northern Saint-Martin	9	82
Curaçao	10	81
South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands	11	80
Seychelles	12	77
Tuvalu	13	77
Wallis and Futuna	14	76
Aruba	15	76
Vanuatu	16	75
British Indian Ocean Territory	17	75
Croatia	18	75
Norway	19	74
Macquarie Island	20	74

Source: [www.oceanhealthindex.org/Countries/](http://www.oceanhealthindex.org/Countries/)

That Somalia comes out ranked 134th is also not so difficult to understand, but it might be a comfort to the marginalized Somali coastal dwellers to know they enjoy better living standards than their fellow “brothers with arms” in the US, which boasts a prominent 146 rank with respect to coastal livelihood and economies.

Under ‘Food Provision’ (harvesting seafood sustainably: “This goal measures the amount of seafood captured or raised in a sustainable way”), Solomon Islands tops the

only surmise that a professional organization like CI must have undertaken this exercise with a purpose.

And the only purpose I can see is to purposely mislead and misinform. I would urge CI to abandon this “index” and join forces in the challenge ahead to improve and increase the ocean’s ability to produce and provide, in an environmental, economic and socially sustainable manner, more food and other goods for the benefit of our world’s growing population. **3**

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ranking, with Heard and McDonald Islands at No.9 and Kerguelen archipelago at No. 15. The uninhabited Kerguelen, which has the globally best opportunities for their nonexistent artisanal fishermen, scores only 15 on providing seafood sustainably. This is most likely due to the bad performance from their nonexistent industrial fishing fleet.

At rank 26, we find Romania, which is well ahead of large seafood producers like the US (ranked 31), Spain (39) and Iceland (75). These three apparently have an unsustainable seafood sector.

Bouvet Island (ranked 147) and Clipperton Island (ranked 149) boast more sustainable seafood production than the world’s sixth largest fishing nation, Russia (ranked 150).

The ‘Ocean Health Index’ is clearly unfit for any serious purpose, as I have argued in meetings with senior CI staff. They admit that the lack of hard facts has made it necessary to use to numerous proxies that give “surprising results”. No hard facts, but hard numbers aplenty.

It is difficult to understand why CI continues to revise and publish this absolutely misleading ‘Ocean Health Index’. Since the work behind it is substantial and costly, one can

#### For more

[www.oceanhealthindex.org/](http://www.oceanhealthindex.org/)

**Ocean Health Index**

[www.conservation.org/global/marine/initiatives/ocean\\_health\\_index/pages/ocean\\_health\\_index.aspx](http://www.conservation.org/global/marine/initiatives/ocean_health_index/pages/ocean_health_index.aspx)

**Conservation International**