

303-HABITATS OF IMPORTANCE

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303.01 Purpose

The Habitats of importance (HOI) is intended to protect and maintain the habitats due to their role in maintaining indigenous marine biodiversity and protecting populations of threatened or endangered species. The habitats of coral reefs, seagrasses, algal mats, mangroves, saltmarshes and mudflats have been identified as being of importance because of their role in maintaining the integrity of the coastal and marine ecosystems and the 'ecosystem services' that they provide. Habitats of Importance also perform an important function with regard to providing natural storm surge defense and as sinks that contribute to blue carbon sequestration.

The HOI Overlay District is also intended to provide a mechanism while reviewing projects or developing infrastructure.

303.02 Applicability

The regulations of this section apply to all lands and waters within the (HOI) overlay district mapped on the Rural Code Map.

303.03 Development Review

The completion of the planning review in line with the procedures and criteria of the Code shall be required prior to development of any structure or plot in an (HOI) overlay district.

A. Marine Protected Areas

The Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are managed by EAD to protect habitats of importance. The following actions should be considered while reviewing the projects in the HOI overlay district:

1. The total aerial extent of MPAs includes a full network to meet the EAD's Biodiversity Strategy (2015-2019) protection targets, including the declaration of Bul Sayeef, Saadiyat, Ras Ghanada and Eastern Mangroves MPAs in addition to the existing Al Yasat MPA and the Marawah Marine Biosphere Reserve (MBR).
2. Projects within these MPAs should develop effective management plans including recovery plans for threatened and endangered species. These plans may incorporate opportunities for low impact recreational and tourism activities and consider compatibility and alignment with trans-boundary conditions.
3. Identify, adopt and manage migratory environmental corridors according to the project management and recovery plan.
4. Conduct research, including underwater surveys and marine mammal migration patterns, to confirm to Abu Dhabi Environmental Vision 2030 targets.
5. When locating recreational and tourism activities in Marine Protected Areas, ensure that they are placed in locations that are most resilient to such activities.
6. All management plans within MPAs are subject to EAD review and approval.

B. Habitats of Importance

Development and activities with the potential to harm habitats of importance will avoid affecting such habitats wherever possible. Where unavoidable, impacts on marine ecosystems will be minimised and mitigated. The following actions should be considered when reviewing projects in the HOI overlay districts:

1. The baseline is the EAD 2015 Habitat survey of the aerial extent of coral reefs, sea grasses, algal mat and mangrove. As this baseline survey has limitations, projects in the HOI overlay district should conduct detailed on-site surveys to confirm the baseline.
2. Projects should develop effective management plans for areas of habitats of importance including recovery plans for threatened and endangered species.
3. Development and activities to avoid areas of habitats of importance. Where avoidance is not possible include requirements to minimise the impacts and adopting mitigation measures to compensate the impacts including documentation of alternatives considered to minimise the impacts and justification for the mitigation measures and the alternative selected.
4. Management plans to include annual reports showing the habitats of importance protected, lost and restored against the 2015 baseline.
5. All management plans within HOI areas are subject to EAD review and approval.

C. Dredging

Dredging will not result in fragmentation or have adverse impacts on habitats of importance. The following actions should be considered when reviewing all projects within (HOI) overlay districts:

1. All dredging activities, including sand extraction, are subject to EAD review and approval.
2. Prohibit dredging within Marine Protected Areas unless clear exceptional circumstances are demonstrated and the spatial extent of the dredged area is minimised.

D. Reclamation

Land reclamation will be considered for Critical National Infrastructure and habitat protection. Other reclamation activities may be considered only within developed areas and only to create open space that provides public benefit without adversely affecting habitats of importance. The following actions should be considered when reviewing all projects within (HOI) overlay districts:

1. Reclamation activities are considered land creation and require UPC approval.
2. Ensure that the area impacted by reclamation will be the minimum required for the proposed operation to avoid adverse impacts on habitats of importance.
3. All reclamation activities are subject to EAD review and approval.