MarineRegions.org – a world reference for Maritime Boundaries

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The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was signed in 1982 and came into force in 1994, defines a series of maritime zones (internal waters, archipelagic waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone and continental shelf) and establishes the degree of rights and obligations of a country in each of those areas.

The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is the basic geo-unit to be considered with regards to a country's management of marine natural resources. This includes sectors such as mineral exploration and exploitation, energy, fisheries, biodiversity and species conservation, etc. Despite the strategic significance of EEZs, a standard georeferenced product with maritime boundaries was not available at the global level (Claus et. al, 2014), until it was developed and made available by the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) in 2006 (Deckers and Vanden Berghe, 2006).

The product developed at VLIZ consisted of two GIS layers providing both the maritime boundaries (lines) and the EEZs (polygons). The layers were regularly updated with 9 consecutive versions published between 2006 and 2016. Version 10 was launched by the VLIZ-hosted portal Marineregions.org in January 2018 and implied minor corrections to version 9.

The Maritime Boundaries is the most popular product available at Marineregions.org. In all its different versions, the product has been downloaded a total of 49153 times (as of end 2017), representing 65% of the total downloads. Changes introduced in the methodology used in version 9, and again in this new version 10, led to an increase in the number of Maritime Boundaries' downloads in 2017 upwards of 150% those of 2016. These boundaries and other derived products are used in many projects related to bio-geographic research and conservation, such as the World Register of Marine Species (WoRMS), The Sea Around Us (Pauly D & Zeller D, 2015), Global Fishing Watch or The Ocean Health Index (Halpern, 2012).

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