The Republic of Palau is a group of 12 inhabited islands and 700+ islets stretching approximately 700 km from northeast to southwest. Palau lies east of Mindanao, Philippines, and north of Irian Jaya, Indonesia. The southernmost islands, particularly Helen Reef, border the Coral Triangle and Palau therefore supports the highest biodiversity of all Micronesian reefs. Palau has a coastline of 1,510 km and a total coral reef area of 1,661 km². Most of Palau’s coral reefs are found around the main islands of Babeldaob, Koror, Peleliu, and Kayangel, and also at Helen Reef.

Palau is well known for its spectacular reefs and has developed into a premier dive destination. However nearshore reefs of Koror and Babeldaob have suffered heavy sedimentation and pollution due to unchecked coastal development, and also a result of road construction. While fishing pressure is not as severe as in the more populated areas of Guam, Saipan, or Chuuk, some destructive fishing does occur, and the live reef fish trade is responsible for the extirpation of at least one (and probably several) major grouper spawning aggregations. In 1998, Palau suffered massive and widespread coral bleaching associated with a particularly strong El Niño – La Niña event. Nationwide coral mortality was estimated at 30%, with some areas experiencing up to 95% coral mortality.
There are 28 officially designated MPAs in Palau. This number does not include local MPAs known as “bul” which are designated by traditional leaders. Of these, 24 are predominantly coral reef areas. Although most of Palau’s MPAs are recently established, Palau also has some of the oldest MPAs in the Pacific region. The Ngerukewid Islands Wildlife Preserve was established in 1956. The Ngerumekaol Spawning Area, established in 1976 as a seasonal area closure, was one of the first MPAs to protect reef fish spawning aggregations. It became a permanent, year-round no-take area in 1999. A second spawning aggregation area, the Ebiil Conservation Area, is also a no-take MPA. It is estimated that over 60 species of reef fish aggregate to spawn at these 2 sites.

The Protected Area Network (PAN) Act was passed in 2003, which aims to establish a nationwide network of terrestrial and marine protected areas. The objective of the PAN is to protect Palau’s biodiversity while assisting with local resource management. MPAs in Palau are administered and managed at the state level. Palau has excellent resources for coral reef monitoring and research, with two major marine science laboratories (Palau International Coral Reef Center and the Coral Reef Research Foundation) and several local, national and international conservation organizations.

There is little available information on the effectiveness of Palau’s MPAs, as many of them are recently established. The Palau International Coral Reef Center is currently conducting research on biophysical and socioeconomic aspects of MPA management.