FAQ #27: What are maritime boundaries and how are they defined?

The maritime zones recognized under international law include internal waters, the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone, the continental shelf, the high seas and the Area. With the exception of the high seas and the Area, each of these maritime zones is measured from the baseline determined in accordance with customary international law as reflected in the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS). The limits of these zones are officially depicted on NOAA nautical charts. The limits shown on the most recent chart edition takes precedence. The boundaries of these maritime zones between coastal nations are established through international agreements entered into by those nations. For the official description of the U.S. maritime boundaries with other nations contact the U.S. Department of State. The Area is comprised of the seabed and subsoil beyond the limits of national jurisdiction. It does not include superadjacent waters (i.e., the water column) or the air space above those waters. The Area and its resources are the common heritage of mankind, and no State may claim or exercise sovereignty or sovereign rights over any part of the Area or its resources.

Figure 77 shows how different states use different vertical datums to define the boundary line between privately-owned and state-owned lands. This graphic also shows how other boundaries are determined for the territorial sea, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), contiguous zone, and high seas.

![Diagram showing different maritime zones and their boundaries](image)

**Figure 77. The official sea level boundaries differ by coastal state.**

**State Waters:** The seaward boundary of the Great Lake States is the U.S.-Canada International boundary. For most other states it is the 3 nautical mile territorial sea. Exceptions include Florida, whose Gulf of Mexico seaward boundary extends to 9 nautical miles; and Puerto Rico and Texas, whose seaward boundaries extend to 9 nautical miles.
Internal state waters are the waters on the landward side of the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured. Each coastal State has full sovereignty over its internal waters as if they were part of its land territory. Examples of internal waters include bays, rivers and even lakes that are connected to the sea, e.g., the Great Lakes.

**Federal Waters:** In most places, Federal waters extend from where state waters end out to about 200 nautical miles or to where other country’s waters begin.

**Navigationally Significant Areas:** NOAA prioritizes areas in need of surveying to maximize limited resources. In the 1990s, the agency examined the 3.4 million square nautical miles (SNM) of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for navigational significance. Navigational significance was determined using information about vessel traffic by vessel type, tracklines, vessel draft vs. water depth, and vessel volume. NOAA determined that approximately 500,000 SNM of the EEZ are navigationally significant. Navigationally significant area can be classified as critical area, priority 1, priority 2, priority 3, priority 4, and priority 5 as defined by the National Hydrographic Survey Priorities.

**Territorial Sea:** Each coastal State may claim a territorial sea that extends seaward up to 12 nautical miles (nm) from its baselines. Generally speaking, the normal baseline is the low-water line along the coast as marked on large-scale charts officially recognized by the coastal State. The coastal State exercises sovereignty over its territorial sea, the air space above it, and the seabed and subsoil beneath it. Foreign flag ships enjoy the right of innocent passage while transiting the territorial sea subject to laws and regulations adopted by the coastal State that are in conformity with the Law of the Sea Convention and other rules of international law relating to such passage. The U.S. claimed a 12 nautical mile territorial sea in 1988.

**Contiguous Zone:** Each coastal State may claim a contiguous zone adjacent to and beyond its territorial sea that extends seaward up to 24 nautical miles from its baselines. In its contiguous zone, a coastal State may exercise the control necessary to prevent the infringement of its customs, fiscal, immigration or sanitary laws and regulations within its territory or territorial sea, and punish infringement of those laws and regulations committed within its territory or territorial sea. Additionally, in order to control trafficking in archaeological and historical objects found at sea, a coastal State may presume that their removal from the seabed of the contiguous zone without its consent is unlawful.

**Outer Continental Shelf (OCS):** Defined in Title 43 of United States Code by Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act 1953. The seaward limit is defined as the farthest of 200 nautical miles seaward of the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured or, if the continental shelf can be shown to exceed 200 nautical miles, a distance not greater than a line 100 nautical miles from the 2,500-meter isobath or a line 350 nautical miles from the baseline.

Outer Continental Shelf limits greater than 200 nautical miles but less than either the 2,500 meter isobath plus 100 nautical miles or 350 nautical miles are defined by a line 60 nautical miles seaward of the foot of the continental slope or by a line seaward of the foot of the continental slope connecting points where the sediment thickness divided by the distance to the foot of the slope equals 0.01, whichever is farthest.

**Exclusive Economic Zone:** Each coastal State may claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) beyond and adjacent to its territorial sea that extends seaward up to 200 nautical miles from its baselines (or out to a maritime boundary with another coastal State). Within its EEZ, a coastal State has: (a) sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring, exploiting, conserving and managing natural resources, whether living or nonliving, of the seabed and
subsoil and the superjacent waters and with regard to other activities for the economic exploitation and
exploration of the zone, such as the production of energy from the water, currents and winds; (b) jurisdiction as
provided for in international law with regard to the establishment and use of artificial islands, installations, and
structures, marine scientific research, and the protection and preservation of the marine environment, and (c)
other rights and duties provided for under international law. The U.S. claimed a 200 nautical mile EEZ in 1983