

MPA NEWS

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Building "Learning Networks" Among MPAs: Projects Aim to Help Managers Learn from Each Other

MPA practitioners can benefit in learning from the experience of their peers, particularly when addressing similar challenges. But with MPAs spread out across the world, the transfer of knowledge among practitioners can be a challenge in itself. Without ways of networking peers - and their knowledge - across potentially great distances, the planning and management of marine protected areas can suffer.

Various projects are now addressing this issue. This month, *MPA News* describes two efforts aimed at building "learning networks" among MPA practitioners. Although these networks are still works-in-progress, they offer examples for practitioners elsewhere.

Networking locally managed marine areas in the Western Pacific

The concept of learning networks as described here is different from other methods of distributing knowledge on MPA management. Networks provide for regular, back-and-forth sharing of information among practitioners - in contrast to training courses for managers, for example, in which knowledge transfer is mostly one-way. At their essence, learning networks are communities of practitioners seeking to determine what makes their projects successful, then sharing those lessons with other practitioners.

In the Western Pacific, a network has been underway since 2000 to help locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) benefit from the collective experience of their managers. Involving more than a dozen sites so far in Southeast Asia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, the LMMA Network consists of a mix of traditional leaders, conservation staff, and others. What they have in common is their involvement in local efforts to manage marine resources through no-take areas or fishing-effort restrictions. The overarching goal of the network is to determine the conditions in which LMMAs work in practice.

With support from the Packard Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation (US-based charitable organizations), the LMMA Network has taken a systematic approach to the collection and sharing of information. Using an agreed-upon framework, each site collects and shares data for a standardized set of variables, thus making comparisons as direct as possible. Most sites are still in the data collection phase, and organizers are just beginning to compare lessons from sites that have already submitted results. (The project website, <http://www.lmmanetwork.org>, will display results later this year.)

There are examples of learning between sites. At an LMMA in Fiji, managers adopted signage used by an LMMA in Indonesia. And sites in the Philippines learned from one other, says Daisy Flores, a member of the network coordination team. "When the Philippine teams came together at an LMMA workshop, it provided them a venue to look at what the others were doing - they learned good lessons such as techniques for quick measurements of fish size." When the Philippine teams went to Fiji for a whole-network meeting, she adds, their eyes were opened to the fact that many other people in the region were concerned about similar issues.

The network has faced challenges. The logistics involved in physically bringing together network members from throughout the Western Pacific have been daunting and expensive. The network website, which offers an electronic discussion forum as a lower-cost way for members to communicate with each other, has not been widely used so far, and is undergoing revisions. (Flores notes that the more remote projects have little access to the internet at the community level.) And explaining and applying the data-collection framework has sometimes proven difficult, even with interested communities, says Cliff Marlessy, who helps coordinate LMMA Network activities in Indonesia. "One problem was that we had to bring together community members and researchers, who initially didn't trust each other and didn't want to work together," he says. By training community members so that they could participate in monitoring, he says, trust was established.

The LMMA data-collection framework could prove useful to other MPA learning networks outside the Western Pacific, says Nick Salafsky of Foundations of Success, a US-based organization that assists the LMMA Network. "The learning framework includes a statement of the core assumptions that we are testing and guidance on how to define specific sites and collect both measures of success and factors contributing to success," he says. "Much of this will be directly relevant to other regions, although a few of the assumptions and factors will likely have to be adapted to fit local needs and conditions." The framework is available online at http://www.lmmanetwork.org/Learning_Framework.asp.

Networking MPAs that share a common source of funding

The Global Environment Facility (GEF), initiated by donor countries in 1991, is a financial mechanism for providing grants to achieve global environmental benefits, including for biodiversity conservation. The GEF channels its grants through implementing agencies - like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) - that are responsible for overseeing the projects and ensuring impact. There are more than 100 UNDP-GEF biodiversity conservation projects around the world. These include a large and growing portfolio of projects involving management of MPAs (with over US\$50 million in GEF funding and \$100 million in co-funding from other sources).

Andrew Bovarnick is the technical advisor for the freshwater, coastal, and marine conservation projects under UNDP-GEF, including those with MPAs. With this array of projects come opportunities for collective learning, he says. In this light, he gathered a subset of the UNDP-GEF projects focused on conservation and sustainable use of coral reef ecosystems, and in 2002 created SHARK: the SHARing Reef Knowledge network.

"SHARK is an attempt on my part to recognize that at UNDP-GEF, we do not just have a series of individual projects but a portfolio of similar projects focusing on marine conservation through MPA development and threat reduction," he says. "I wanted SHARK to help facilitate the creation of a community of practitioners - both experts and government staff - who could dialogue with each other on a regular basis as they confront similar challenges. Each UNDP-GEF team felt it was the only one dealing with a particular problem or issue, but in fact all the teams in our projects were facing similar challenges." There are SHARK projects in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, South East Asia, and the Pacific.

Similar to the LMMA Network, SHARK provides a discussion forum for members on its website (<http://roo.undp.org/gef/shark/index.cfm>), as well as opportunities for face-to-face meetings and project visits. Although it does not feature as formalized a data-collection framework as the LMMA Network, SHARK does seek to post lessons learned, best practices, and common conservation strategies collected from participating projects, as they become available. Lessons learned from some individual projects are available on the SHARK website.

To this point, use of the SHARK website and its forum has been limited, says Bovarnick, who says project teams will probably need to meet each other in person first to build relationships. "Once trust and respect are built and teams see the value in each other's work, then dialogue and partnerships will form," he says. "Hence we need to facilitate more face-to-face meetings and other opportunities for discussion." He points out that the director of a UNDP-GEF project in Belize is traveling to Cuba this July to help conduct a workshop on MPA financing for UNDP-GEF projects in Latin America.

MPAs interested in seeking UNDP-GEF support should visit the UNDP-GEF website (<http://www.undp.org/gef>) for further information. Requests must be endorsed by central government as national priorities for GEF biodiversity support, and must fit within the GEF's criteria for support. The GEF is cautious about "one-off" funding at specific sites, preferring to support an overall program to move an entire system toward sustainability. The GEF has recently established two strategic priorities of relevance to MPAs, says Bovarnick: one regarding sustainability of protected area systems, and one on mainstreaming biodiversity into productive landscapes or seascapes.

For more information:

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BOX: Background on UNDP-GEF coastal and marine projects

UNDP-GEF coastal and marine projects provide significant financial resources and technical expertise for assistance at local and national levels. Assistance takes several forms, including:

- Development of national policy and legal frameworks;
- Development and implementation of management plans at MPAs;
- Development of long-term financing strategies for MPA networks;
- Raising of public awareness;
- Support for socioeconomic development of communities in and around MPAs;
- Promotion of community-based marine and reef resource management;
- Building of partnerships with productive sectors such as fisheries, tourism, and other industry; and
- Capacity-building of stakeholders to continue and replicate conservation efforts after project termination.

GEF recently awarded through UNDP a US\$3.5 million grant, with an additional US\$7 million in co-financing, to the government of Chile to establish three multi-use marine and coastal protected areas. Project goals are to demonstrate integrated management of marine and coastal resources, and build capacity for management and replication along the coast of Chile.

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