

MPA NEWS



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Effort underway in Bahamas to create a financially sustainable MPA from the ground up

One of the main challenges facing MPAs is securing enough funding to meet their program and staffing needs. MPAs are typically dependent on government sources for most or all of their funding. In an era of budgetary cutbacks, this has led to financial shortfalls for many sites.

Who is going to pay for MPAs? In the Bahamas, an effort is underway to create an MPA that is financially self-sufficient from the start. The approach: build a site that serves the needs of researchers and filmmakers in a very user-friendly way, and charge them for that service.

A unique property and operations program

The Long Island Marine Management Area (LIMMA) - an 870-km² area of water that has been proposed for national designation as an MPA - features coral reefs, blue holes, sand bars, wetlands, and grouper spawning aggregation sites. While the site awaits an official decision on protection, several NGOs and academic institutions that support its designation are building a set of programs to help the site generate its own income.

Leading that effort is the Ocean CREST Alliance (OCA, www.oceancrestalliance.org), an NGO with offices in the Bahamas and the US. "For the Long Island site, OCA has developed a unique property and operations program," says Joe Ierna, founder of the organization. "This program provides a means for the site to be financially sustainable, while also operating sustainably within nature and the adjacent community." (OCA's partners on LIMMA include the Bahamas National Trust, Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Florida Biodiversity Institute, Mission Blue, and the University of Florida Conservation Clinic, among others.)

Ierna's background is in the yachting business, and he says that MPAs should be run more like the private sector. "To have successful MPAs, we must design and operate them like any other successful business venture," he says. The same way that businesses are focused on serving their customers' needs, says Ierna, an MPA should do so as well.

In the case of LIMMA, he says, those customers are likely to be researchers and filmmakers. Long Island is a relatively rare example of a site with significant baseline marine resource population data generated prior to MPA designation. So Ierna believes it will be in demand among scientists looking to do controlled before-and-after studies of the MPA's effects (the site is expected to be zoned with some no-take areas). Long Island's spectacular marine features, too, like its blue holes (vertical underwater caves), should prove popular with filmmakers, he says. As a result, the site must meet the needs of these two groups.

Building the architecture of a site

Central to meeting users' needs, says Ierna, is having facilities that support them. He refers to this as MPA architecture. For Long Island, the architectural plan is designed to provide researchers and filmmakers with all they need:

- Each facility associated with the MPA will offer lodging space, a workshop area, equipment, vessels, storage, and communications capability, as well as food gardens.
- Each facility will run on renewable energy, avoiding dependence on delivered fossil fuels.
- Containerized mobile lab spaces called "docking stations" - 20 feet or 40 feet in length - will be available and customized to users' requirements, for both land and sea deployment.

OCA anticipates building the first facility on site by the end of 2015.

Selling timeshares to users

The funding will enter through another business idea imported to LIMMA: timeshares, or what OCA calls E-shares (*for environmental*). By purchasing a share of the time available at one of the MPA's facilities, researchers and filmmakers will have dependable access to the services provided without having to compete with others for space. For US users (Long Island is 590 km from the US), the payments will be tax-deductible.

Taken all together, this is an ambitious program. "Now we have to make it reality," says Ierna. He says the E-share program will be operational as soon as the first facility is ready this year, whether the MPA has been designated by that time or not.

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