

MPA NEWS



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Letter to the editor: IUCN consensus needlessly ignores cultural MPAs

Dear *MPA News*,

I am writing in response to your article [Sharpening our focus on MPAs for 2020 and beyond: The emerging consensus on what is and is not an MPA, and the key types of MPAs](#) (Dec 2018 / Jan 2019).

I am somewhat challenged by the standards advanced by IUCN and others to constrain what we should consider an "MPA" to only those places where the primary objective is nature conservation. There are, around the world, many important marine sites where management is primarily focused on preservation of historic and cultural heritage resources. Under the new IUCN standards, these sites would no longer be considered MPAs. As these are places in the ocean and along the coasts that are permanently preserved under law or policy, and as they possess management plans that guide effective stewardship of these resources, it seems to me a bit arrogant to exclude such areas from being considered marine protected areas. This seems inconsistent with other ways we identify and recognize places worthy of protection, such as World Heritage Sites, which can include either (or both) natural and cultural heritage resources of outstanding universal value.

Clearly we could do a far more effective job of conserving natural resources and biodiversity in our MPAs, and we are facing considerable challenges to successfully accomplish this goal. But I have some difficulty believing that adopting a new definition of MPA that excludes cultural heritage-focused MPAs will lead to much-needed improvements in natural resource and biodiversity-focused MPAs. The effective preservation of all coastal and marine resources, whether natural or cultural, demands public support and engagement. The challenges faced by MPA managers in preserving both categories of resources are much the same, and the list of human activities that degrade and diminish them is quite similar. There is strong and broad public interest in and support for preserving cultural heritage resources. So why would the MPA community do anything that would marginalize this important constituency of support for marine protection and conservation?

As you may remember, this is not the first time I have offered some comment to *MPA News* regarding issues related to the how we define MPAs, as the terminology employed is often subject to whims of creative wordsmithing that confound and confuse rather than clarify. Undoubtedly words do matter, and how we define MPAs should be universally adopted and endorsed. However, a myopic and, in my view, misguided attempt to focus the definition of MPA on only natural resources and biodiversity preservation is contrary to the interests of effective preservation. Fostering public support for resource conservation should be as encompassing as possible, and marginalizing one large component of that support is not likely a viable path forward.

I offer this comment as a member of the MPA community, as an individual MPA practitioner with many decades of experience, and in no way reflecting the views or positions of any agency or university with which I am affiliated. I just felt that a contrary perspective was needed, hopefully to encourage more debate and dialogue regarding this idea for redefining "MPA". The challenges facing us are considerable, and we can ill afford to act in a way that further divides our community from its common interests and goals.

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