Marine Peace Parks: Establishing Transboundary MPAs to Improve International Relations and Conservation

Ecosystems and their wildlife do not recognize political boundaries. Therefore, in many cases, management must take transboundary conservation into account. Efforts to achieve conservation across national borders are often described in the context of pursuing ecosystem-based management.

But transboundary conservation can yield other benefits, too. This month, MPA News examines the use of MPAs across borders to improve international relations. Whether designated explicitly as part of a peace process between nations, or as a way to broaden an already-friendly relationship between neighbors, marine peace parks offer a means of promoting cooperation and better conservation.

What is a peace park?

In discussions of protected areas across borders, multiple terms are often encountered: transboundary protected areas, transfrontier conservation areas, peace parks, and so forth. Often practitioners use these terms interchangeably. For the purpose of this article, MPA News will generally do that as well.

IUCN defines "parks for peace" as:

"Transboundary protected areas that are formally dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and to the promotion of peace and cooperation."

Referring to a site as a "peace park" does not necessarily imply that the nations involved were previously in conflict. As a case in point, the site generally considered to have been the first peace park is the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, designated in 1932 by traditional allies Canada and the US. Rather, a transboundary protected area contributes to a culture of peace and cooperation between nations, as explained by Anne Hammill of the International Institute of Sustainable Development and Charles Besançon of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre. In an essay published in the 2007 book Peace Parks: Conservation and Conflict Resolution (MIT Press), Hammill and Besançon suggest a transboundary protected area can play any of the following geopolitical roles:

- Acting as a symbol of ongoing cooperation between nations with a history of peace;
- Creating an entry point for discussions between neighboring countries that may be deeply divided over economic, social, environmental, or other interests;
- Increasing security and control over resources in border areas so that their rightful owners can benefit from them;
- Creating shared opportunities for ecotourism and sustainable development ventures on a region-wide scale, an important step in post-conflict reconstruction; and
- Developing a rich and resilient web of relationships among protected area managers from the countries involved, other government actors, local and international NGOs, and the donor community.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has tallied the number of transboundary protected area "complexes" currently in existence, both terrestrial and marine. According to UNEP, there are 227 of these (see www.foopa.net/sea_inventory.html). Some of the complexes are enormous, consisting of dozens of individual protected areas. One complex that features the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, for example, is considered by UNEP to include 80 protected areas among the countries of Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico. At this scale, the term "peace park" may become less applicable: in these large complexes, not every one of the individual protected areas may have been designated with transboundary cooperation as a specific goal.

There are several transboundary MPAs designated expressly to further international cooperation and conservation. The Wadden Sea International Protected Region - consisting of multiple MPAs and other managed areas in Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands - is a leading example of ecosystem-based management (MPA News 8:4). The 100,000-km² Pelagius Sanctuary for cetaceans in the Ligurian Sea requires cooperation among France, Italy, and Monaco (MPA News 5:3). The Eastern Tropical Pacific Corridor initiative, including portions of the EEZs of Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Panama, is another example (MPA News 7:4). The Southern Ocean, managed as an enormous protected region by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, is one more.

In terms of existing for the specific purpose of furthering peace, however, the foremost example in the marine realm might be in the Red Sea.

Red Sea Marine Peace Park

The term "peace park" applies quite literally what Israel and Jordan have designated in the northern Gulf of Aqaba, a semi-enclosed sea shared by these nations. As part of their peace treaty signed in 1994 to normalize relations, Israel and Jordan developed the bi-national Red Sea Marine Peace Park (RSMPP), embodying two existing MPAs: Jordan's Aqaba Marine Park and Israel's Coral Reef Reserve in Eilat. The designation of the RSMPP called on the nations to partner in research efforts on coral reefs and marine life, and implement comparable policies and regulations to protect those reefs.

This resulted, in 1999, in launch of the RSMPP Program - a full partnership between resource management agencies and marine research institutions in Jordan and Israel. Facilitated by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Program aimed to provide resource managers of both countries with scientific understanding of the basic physical, chemical, and biological processes in the Gulf of Aqaba, and the impacts of human activities on those processes. Study teams and management teams from the respective national agencies participated in joint meetings and workshops twice a year or more, sharing information, coordinating activities, and discussing trends. The cooperative research, for example, determined basic water circulation patterns affecting the RSMPP, and initiated a long-term monitoring initiative for basic coral reef ecosystem parameters. All data from the monitoring have been entered into an open database of Program-related information. (For a full description of the RSMPP Program, including lessons learned, go to www.cnps.org/har-park/03WPC-EA4-2002%20Report%2001.pdf.)

The RSMPP has no budget, per se. Instead, each country funds its own component of the RSMPP. Aqaba Marine Park, for example, is 90% funded by the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, a Jordanian statutory institution. The remaining funds for the site are generated by various user fees in the park, such as from registration and the testing of air tanks for diving.

Notably, the two individual sites are not contiguous: the no-take Aqaba Marine Park is 17 km from the Jordan/Israel border. But they share common natural resources (including nearly 1000 species of fish) and are affected by the same environmental stresses. Both Jordan and Israel are promoting the northern Gulf of Aqaba as a tourism destination center, with water projects and other coastal infrastructure developments accelerating the regional growth rate, causing various environmental impacts.

"If the RSMPP had not been established, the Aqaba Marine Park (AMP) would not be what it is today," says Abdullah Abu Awali, the marine park's manager. "The RSMPP Program had a significant role in establishing the AMP management plan, and several regulations and guidelines suggested by the RSMPP have been implemented by the AMP. These regulations and guidelines have promoted and encouraged environmentally sustainable use of natural intertidal resources, and ensured long-term economic benefits."

Korea Marine Peace Park

Lessons from the RSMPP, as well as from various terrestrial peace parks, are being applied in efforts to establish a marine peace park on the Korean Peninsula. In 2005, the South Korean government issued a Presidential Executive Order to initiate a marine peace park with North Korea in the countries' disputed western sea. Although the initiative would be unilateral for the time being - prepared with no input from the North Korean government - it was intended to help ensure the goal of sustainable and peaceful development in the region, symbolized by the "3 Ps": protection of ecological integrity, peace, and economic prosperity.

Unlike on land, where the Koreans have a 4-km-wide, heavily-fortified demilitarized zone to keep people from crossing, their sea boundary has no physical barrier. However, the countries' respective navies and coast guards regularly confront each other in the region, and there is disagreement over where the boundary lies. There have been two naval gunfights between the Koreas in the western sea. And as
recently as 28 March 2008, the North Korean government fired several missiles off its west coast amid growing tensions between that country and the new South Korean government of President Lee Myung-bak. Since its inauguration in February 2008, the Lee government has taken a hawkish stance toward North Korea compared to the government of former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun.

The change of government in South Korea is affecting prospects for a marine peace park. Much has seemingly changed since 2007, when the second inter-Korean Summit (involving the Roh administration at the time) resulted in a Joint Declaration featuring a series of cross-border cooperation projects. Among these was the official designation of a Special Peace and Cooperation Zone (SPCZ) around the disputed western sea border. "The SPCZ is the core of the Joint Declaration," says Jungho Nam, who manages the Korean marine peace park project at the Korea Maritime Institute in South Korea. Although negotiations on the SPCZ focused on economic and political issues (e.g., designating a joint fishing area and establishing a special economic zone) and not on ecological protection, Nam says it could still provide a framework for eventual institution of a Korean marine peace park (the "MPP Korea"). "One of the SPCZ's core elements is the sustainable development of the region," he says. "The SPCZ is a cornerstone for developing and promoting the MPP Korea."

Despite the legal and institutional bases for cooperation established last year, it is unclear whether President Lee's administration is interested in promoting and furthering the Declaration, or even the 2005 Presidential Executive Order on the MPP Korea. Nam says there are other challenges, too. "Because North Korea has a strong interest in economic development and securing capital, they are normally prone to choosing development-oriented projects rather than taking a balanced approach to development and conservation," he says. "And considering the policy of the new South Korean administration, political support will be given to the development sector here as well. Many developers, construction companies, and local governments in the coastal area want to take benefits from sand mining, reclamation projects, and other construction projects."

To address these challenges, the Korea Maritime Institute has suggested principles for promoting the MPP Korea. "First, a non-political approach led by experts should be highlighted," says Nam. "The political relationship between the two Koreas is getting worse, and in this situation politicians may hesitate to promote the initiative. Progress can still be made, however, by individuals who have done research in the area. From my understanding, even when the political situation and inter-Korean relations have been at their worst, contacts and meetings through expert groups have still occurred."

Second, says Nam, building partnerships with international and regional bodies is important. "Securing international support for the MPP Korea could contribute to spreading the importance of the initiative with international societies, and creating an environment for involving North Korea in establishing the marine peace park," he says. "North Korea is a member of international and regional programs, especially environmental ones. These could function as a bridge for making the inter-Korean relationship closer." The MPP Korea project has organized and facilitated an international advisory group composed of multiple institutions and initiatives, including UNESCO, IUCN, the GEF Yellow Sea Large Marine Ecosystem Project, and the UNEP Northwest Pacific Action Plan. The project has also hosted a Jordanian RSMPP official to share his peace park experiences, and has had colleagues visit other transboundary MPAs around the world.

Third is to be patient, says Nam: it will take time to raise social awareness and support for the MPP Korea project. "We've suggested a three-track approach for the establishment of the MPP initiative," he says. "National, inter-Korean, and international coordination and cooperation."

For more details on the MPP Korea initiative, download the 66-page report "Toward Establishing the Marine Peace Park in the Western Transboundary Coastal Area of the Korean Peninsula" (2007, Korea Maritime Institute) here.

For more information

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For an 18-minute DVD on the MPP Korea project, e-mail Jungho Nam.

BOX: Types of transboundary protected areas

Following the World Parks Congress in 2003, the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas established a Global Transboundary Protected Areas Network to promote biodiversity through peaceful cooperation across borders (www.tbpa.net). That network has defined several different types of transboundary protected areas:

- Two or more contiguous protected areas across a national boundary.
- A cluster of protected areas and the intervening land or water.
- A cluster of separated protected areas without including the intervening land/water.
- A trans-border area including proposed protected areas (such as when a transboundary initiative starts with protected areas in one country or region, with the hope of extending protection across the border).
- A protected area in one country aided by sympathetic land/water use over the border.

BOX: Candidate sites for marine peace parks and transboundary research

In an 2002 paper on lessons learned from the Red Sea Marine Peace Park, a team of managers and researchers from Israel, Jordan, and the US suggested that several other marine sites worldwide could benefit from similar transboundary efforts. Their recommended sites:

- Eastern Caribbean Island states
- Gaza/Jordan/Israel on the Mediterranean coast
- Pakistan and India near the Indus River delta region
- Former republics of Yugoslavia on the Adriatic Sea
- Greece and Turkey on Cyprus
- The Pratas Island/Spratly Islands region of the South China Sea


BOX: Publications on peace parks and transboundary protected areas


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