

MPA NEWS



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MPA News Poll: The Coming Challenges for MPAs, and How to Address Them

This month's First International Marine Protected Areas Congress (IMPAC1), to be held 23-28 October in Geelong, Australia, is one of the first global conferences devoted solely to the subject of MPAs. Hopefully many more will follow. Unanswered questions still abound on aspects of MPA science (e.g. the effects of reserves on neighboring fisheries) and on best practices in planning and management. The more opportunities that exist for researchers and practitioners worldwide to share their knowledge, the sooner we will grasp the strengths and weaknesses of MPAs as management tools.

As we work toward this understanding, individual sites and the MPA field as a whole will continue to face challenges related to planning, management, science, monitoring, politics, and other aspects. In this light, *MPA News* this month asked several forward-thinking practitioners and researchers a question:

"What will be the greatest challenge facing the field of MPAs over the next decade, and how would you like to see this challenge addressed?"

Their responses offer readers a slate of issues to consider:

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The greatest challenge facing the field of MPAs historically, now, and into the future is human nature and how to overcome its destructive attributes. The worst attributes seem to be:

1. In users of the sea - selfishness and the ability to deny reality for the sake of immediate gain; and
2. In decision-makers and managers - the tendency to exclude the users of the sea from the very first stages of planning and management, and sometimes subsequently.

These deficiencies (which, on the evidence of their ubiquity, are probably imprinted genetically) must be widely recognized, and measures must be taken to overcome their expression and their destructive results. If this is not done, it seems unlikely that action will be taken in time to achieve a global, representative system of MPAs that is sufficiently robust to "maintain essential ecological processes and life support systems; preserve genetic diversity; and ensure the sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems." (IUCN *Guidelines for Marine Protected Areas*)

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There will be many equal challenges, but a critical one is that MPAs, planners, governments, and society must look "outside the box". While MPAs are one of the best tools we currently have for management, this is essentially because they represent a very non-subtle ownership trump card (that is, the "owner" of the location - a government agency or indigenous community, for example - is able to exclude others from using it). Much more difficult will be to improve management of waters outside of MPAs, where ownership is loose or multi-dimensional, issues are larger, and more subtle means of problem identification, resolution, and negotiation will be needed. What happens in these areas, which are by far the major part of coastal and open ocean waters, will make or break the efficacy of what is done within MPAs. The concepts of coastal zone management and "downstream impacts", where downstream means a large and diffuse three-dimensional volume of shifting waters, will need to evolve to facilitate better management.

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In the developing world, the greatest challenge to MPAs is undoubtedly how to achieve and sustain effective on-site management that stops rampant overexploitation so typical for paper parks. This requires a change of paradigms in the international conservation community. MPAs need to be seen from an economic and resource-use perspective that acknowledges perverse incentives at work in present institutional arrangements. While consuming impressive (often aid) resources, inefficient state parks frequently fail to involve local resource users from the formal and "informal" private sector - mostly fisheries and tourism. (In much of Africa, the distinction between "local community" and "private sector" in fisheries is muddled; fishing is often for more than just subsistence, and much of the fish trade goes underground to avoid taxation or other governmental pressures.)

Conservation organizations and donors must broaden their policies and overcome their alliance with monopolistic state bureaucracies and bogus government-created or donor-created unrepresentative local NGOs. The tragedy is that these institutions all have an unintended but nevertheless common denominator: lack of accountability to resource users on the ground. To talk about local communities as partners in conservation and exclude the private sector is hunting a chimera.

For terrestrial parks, as a direct response to poor performance of the State, private conservation is growing fast. Southern Africa alone has more than 10,000 private game ranches, privately managed nature reserves, and conservancies. While not always a panacea, many are profitable, while effectively conserving nature and biodiversity and directly benefiting local communities. Their success needs to be acknowledged and replicated for marine conservation, where the tragedy of the commons is nearly universal, and property rights and security of tenure particularly undeveloped.

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The challenges may differ from one region to another depending on the socioeconomic status of each region, the dependency of development on exploitation of marine resources, and the level of environmental awareness of active sectors, especially regarding sustainable and integrated development of the coastal and marine environment.

In the Arabian Gulf region, the greatest challenges facing the field of MPAs in the next decade are:

1. Empowering institutional capacity to solve user conflicts inside MPAs in a manner consistent with the goals and objectives of these MPAs. In addition, privately protected islands in the region (often used as captive breeding centers for threatened species of interest) should be considered as part of the regional network of MPAs, and managed according to international standards of MPA management.
2. Ensuring funding for operations, surveillance, and monitoring. This challenge requires political and financial persuasion as well as governmental support.
3. Addressing transboundary issues that affect MPAs, and placing them on the agenda of regional meetings of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) and the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME). Hopefully, this will lead to more efficient cooperation in the field of marine environmental protection in general and MPAs in particular.

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The biggest challenge will be bringing order out of the burgeoning number of case histories that are accumulating. We have largely emerged from the "polarized period" when discussion of MPAs was too often a non-dialogue between believers (who often verged on the fanatic in their enthusiasm) and non-believers (who had a comparable share of fanaticism in their denial). Recently, discussion tends to focus more constructively on objectives and consequences of new MPAs. These discussions should be informed by lessons learned from experiences already gained with MPAs. However, we are stuck with a legacy of past overzealous claims about benefits and entrenched criticisms by skeptics. This is a dangerous situation when there are so many case histories accumulating. Partisans from both camps

can cherry-pick their way, assembling advocacy cases that MPAs either (A) achieve great things and don't have the shortcomings claimed by their critics, or (B) fail to deliver on promised benefits and bring negative side-effects. Such "advocacy science" needs to be countered effectively if we are to have our understanding of the benefits and costs of MPAs reach maturity, and provide a basis for the effective use of this important tool in conservation and management. It can only be countered by comprehensive and objective evaluation of our experiences with MPAs.

Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara, Mediterranean Coordinator, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, Italy. E-mail: disciara@tin.it

MPAs in the Mediterranean are testimony to the failure to avoid negative human impact on the sea: since we have been unable to manage ourselves and our activities, we have at least set aside small portions of the sea where the challenges of conserving habitats and species can be more easily (if not always effectively) addressed. If humans were able to manage their activities at sea in such a way as to use marine resources sustainably everywhere - and avoid dumping large amounts of noxious waste, destroying habitats, and impoverishing biodiversity - then the need for large, multiple-use MPAs that we now have in the Mediterranean would become questionable.

MPAs are badly needed at the moment in the region, and the greatest effort should be devoted to strengthening them through the organization of a regional system of networks. However, while we strive to refine MPAs during the next decade to conserve marine habitats and species in increasingly sophisticated and effective ways, our main challenge should be to remember that MPAs as a tool for managing human activities at sea should, ultimately, become superfluous. Reaching this awareness will require a considerable change in our current perspectives. In this process, the existing MPAs can serve as a powerful real-world demonstration that coexistence of a healthy marine environment with human economies is possible.

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The main challenge facing MPAs is to make the concept redundant as soon as possible. As marine planning and policy advances, the idea that only some areas of the sea will be protected (which really means the intelligent regulation of human activities) will soon be seen as inadequate and, finally, as absurd. This advance could occur by an extension of terrestrial planning systems, which focus on people and their existing activities. An alternative exists, although at present it is only vaguely described in words like ecosystem management and holistic planning. The sea is very different from land and humans cannot occupy it in any permanent sense. This difference could allow marine planning to focus on the future. It could aim at maintaining the natural processes that make the planet a fit place for us to live, by curtailing our activities where these are wasteful or damaging. The first step toward this would be the widespread establishment of highly protected marine reserves, the only permanently valid form of marine protected areas.

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Marine protected areas dramatically reflect the problem of conserving ecosystems. Unlike terrestrial protected areas, MPAs are open to inputs from land and sea and have no hard boundaries within which to operate. They currently have more symbolic value than actual management value in terms of ensuring the conservation of ecosystems and the cultures that rely on them. The challenge for the next decade is to turn that around. To rise to this challenge, we must alter not only how MPAs are managed, but how we manage ourselves.

This is where MPAs have a special role to play: to fundamentally affect the ethics, behavior, and values of humans. Because there is intrinsic value in the relationship of humans to the sea, MPAs as real places can be leaders of behavioral change - inspiring society to place a higher value on the biota, beauty, and important services that healthy coasts and oceans provide us. The challenge is for those who manage, fund, and support MPAs to understand clearly that these sites are a means to an end (i.e., education and behavioral change), and cannot be sustained unless that end is achieved. This will require doing all the basics well - i.e., the management plan, monitoring program, enforcement, etc. - without losing sight of the endgame.

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The desire for quick fixes has led to a proliferation of MPAs - many in areas where they are not needed, executed in a way that does not address the threats at hand, and planned with little consideration of long-term financial and social feasibility. This constitutes misuse of the MPA tool for a number of reasons: it initially gives decision-makers and their constituents a false sense of security that something has been done to slow marine degradation, and it can eventually make the public lose confidence in MPAs when it realizes that these MPAs confer little protection.

Even well-planned and executed MPAs are difficult undertakings, because we often expect too much of them. Those with long experience in protected areas recognize that individual MPAs can do only so much in terms of abating fisheries over-exploitation, protecting biodiversity, and safeguarding important ecosystem services. Thus we need to push for MPA networks - strategically designed to protect what is ecologically most critical and most threatened, while freeing up large areas of the coastal seas for regulated sustainable use. But implementing networks is a notoriously challenging process, not least because the timeframes needed are beyond most planning horizons of decision-makers, government agencies, and other institutions.

Overcoming society's need for instant gratification is no mean feat, and not something the marine community can do alone. But if we are courageous and institute a few examples that show how such networks confer substantial long-term benefits, leaders with foresight and the public interest in mind will pick up the gauntlet.

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