

# MPA NEWS



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## MPA Perspective: International Advisory Boards: A Tool for Local MPA Management

**Editor's note:** Marion Howard served for six years as environmental advisor and MPA coordinator for CORALINA, a Colombian government agency. CORALINA manages the natural resources and sustainable development of Colombia's vast San Andres Archipelago, designated in 2000 as the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve. The marine section of the reserve is 300,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

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**By Marion Howard, Former MPA Coordinator, CORALINA**

In isolated coastal communities, MPAs can face the challenge of promoting local management without sacrificing expertise. CORALINA, a Colombian government agency that manages natural resources in the nation's San Andres Archipelago, encountered this challenge when it began work to establish a system of MPAs. The agency was determined to have local people run the project for several reasons, including:

- The need for in-depth local environmental, social, economic, and historical knowledge.
- Islanders' distrust of off-islanders, which could affect project success in ways ranging from an unwillingness to share information to a refusal to accept MPAs or participate in the project.
- Awareness that successful sustainable development projects are rooted in local ownership.
- The project's potential to build local capacity and to empower disenfranchised minorities and women.
- Local poverty and unemployment, so jobs generated would be an important benefit. Resentment would be high if these jobs went to outsiders.

There was little local experience, however, in marine management. Then an idea emerged in project planning meetings with the funding agency, GEF-World Bank: Why not set up a board of international experts to advise the local project team? Thus, the concept of our international advisory board (IAB) was born. To ensure that it was central to project success, creating the IAB became a project benchmark, funds were earmarked, and annual meetings were performance indicators.

Developing terms of reference was the first step. The board's purpose would be simple: to advise CORALINA on developing and implementing locally managed MPAs. IAB members would be expected to advise on their areas of expertise, build staff capacity, and act as contacts with their organizations. Members would be individuals or organizations with expertise in marine affairs, especially MPAs, and in regional environmental issues.

The next step was to identify members. International project partners (namely The Ocean Conservancy and Island Resources Foundation) made recommendations, as did regional bodies, including UNEP and the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas. After reviewing the recommendations, the project team submitted invitations to several recognized experts who collectively represented a variety of disciplines: planners, managers, social and biological scientists, and legal and policy experts. To promote involvement and manage costs, membership was limited to ten. The IAB took shape, and remains active today.

After setting up the board, CORALINA faced the reality of managing it. Because regular communication is crucial, the amount of effort required can be a challenge. It became apparent that one person should link CORALINA and the IAB, lead the process to determine discussion topics, and organize annual meetings of the board in San Andres. (The project covers travel costs to board meetings for members.) This job fell to the MPA coordinator and was formalized in the coordinator's contract. Another challenge came in scheduling the annual meetings, given the experts' workloads. Reaching consensus early each year on logistics helps, but there can still be members who are unable to attend.

Board members agree that their role is not to make decisions or define directions. Rather, locally defined project needs determine the topics for consideration. Meetings focus on yearly concerns. To date, these have included zoning objectives and methodology, management bodies, legal and policy frameworks, enforcement, financial sustainability, and examining community-based zoning alternatives.

Board members are the project's international advocates. They generate interest in CORALINA within the international conservation community and help involve MPA staff in conferences, networks, and programs. Most members have spent weeks in San Andres, and all have supported research and/or developed joint programs with CORALINA through their organizations.

Unforeseen benefits have also resulted. Because local professionals are relatively isolated, information exchange is especially valuable. The project team was immediately struck by the board members' willingness to share information: community relations and the staff's professional style were positively affected by this attitude. Giving presentations at annual meetings and interacting with international colleagues have improved the confidence and validated the skills of local team members. From these interactions, MPA personnel have learned that they, too, are experts.

The IAB process is truly bilateral - advisors and staff learn from each other. Not only is the IAB of inestimable value in MPA development, but contacts made should outlast the project and strengthen community-based management. Ideally, the IAB will play a long-term role in the MPAs. CORALINA's experience is adaptable to other communities facing the dilemma of sustaining commitment to local management. This tool allows internationally recognized experts and local staff to understand the status and future of an MPA, share experiences, discuss alternatives, and work together on an on-going basis.

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