

MPA NEWS



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MPA Perspective: Responding to the Commercial Fishing Industry's Concerns with MPAs in Australia

Editor's note: Pascale Baelde, author of the following perspective piece, is a senior research fellow in fisheries at the School of Resource, Environmental and Heritage Sciences, University of Canberra (Australia). The piece is based on a report she co-authored with Robert Kearney of the University of Canberra, and Daryl McPhee of the University of Queensland. (P. Baelde, R. Kearney and D. McPhee [2001]. "A coordinated commercial fishing industry approach to the use of marine protected areas." Final FRDC project, Project No 1999/163, University of Canberra, Australia, 197 pp.) A non-technical summary of the report is available online at <http://www.frdc.com.au>. Copies of the full report may be obtained from the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, P.O. Box 222, Deakin West ACT 2600, Australia. There is a charge to cover printing costs; e-mail frdc@frdc.com.au to confirm availability and price.

In the following piece, Baelde uses the term "MPAs" to refer to reserves implemented primarily for biodiversity conservation and not for fisheries management purposes - i.e., areas selected for their representativeness, rather than according to biological and ecological characteristics of individual fish species.

By Pascale Baelde

The development of a national representative system of marine protected areas (MPAs) is a core component of the Australian Oceans Policy released in 1998. While there is no doubt that MPAs have an important role to play in the protection of marine resources, this government initiative generates great uncertainty within the commercial fishing industry. In 1999, researchers from the Universities of Canberra and Queensland carried out a study to identify and analyze industry's concerns with MPAs.

In Australia, MPAs are used essentially for biodiversity conservation and are implemented by conservation agencies. The study shows that most of the difficulties between government and industry are created by the lack of integration of fisheries management (increasingly based on allocation of fishing rights) and biodiversity conservation objectives. As a result, existing MPA planning processes often fail to properly recognize and address the potential negative impacts of MPAs on commercial fisheries.

The assessment and management of these potential impacts are the responsibility of fisheries agencies, but to date these agencies have shown limited engagement with MPA planning. This situation has created an imbalance between the needs for environmental conservation using MPAs and the needs for sustainable use of fish resources. The study concludes that the combination of loss of access to fishing grounds; poor planning and poor consultation; mixed and confusing messages on whether MPAs achieve their objectives; and lack of government commitment to monitoring and enforcement gives fishers little confidence in the value of MPAs.

This situation presents challenges for both government and industry. To assist MPA negotiations in Australia, deficiencies in government processes in responding to industry's concerns and industry's responsibilities were identified.

Challenges for agencies planning MPAs

Some essential principles need to be acknowledged during MPA planning by government:

- Commercial fishing is a long-established, legitimate activity and a service to the community, and fishers are major stakeholders in the management of marine resources;
- MPAs may have little, if any, benefits to commercial fisheries; and
- MPAs may have negative impacts on commercial fisheries and on the effectiveness of existing management systems.

To apply these principles, government conservation agencies should demonstrate a commitment to addressing fisheries-specific issues by:

- Seeking expert advice on fisheries issues through consultation with fishers, fisheries scientists and managers;
- Ensuring that adequate research is undertaken to assess biological and socio-economic impacts of MPAs on fisheries; and
- Exploring ways to mitigate identified negative impacts (e.g., by negotiating MPA boundaries, or developing compensation or fisheries re-structuring mechanisms).

It is necessary that agencies demonstrate that MPAs are being used properly for environmental protection. That is:

- Environmental values, land- and sea-based threats, and conservation needs are identified at the relevant regional and local scales;
- Objectives of individual MPAs are clearly established and address identified conservation needs;
- Management plans are designed before the declaration of MPAs and (1-5):
 1. Clearly relate the size, location and regulations of MPAs to specific conservation objectives;
 2. Include a monitoring program to check MPA performance, with practical performance measures;
 3. Include adequate compliance measures (both education and enforcement);
 4. Include audit mechanisms to review the performance of MPAs and describe actions to be taken if they do not reach their objectives; and
 5. Detail resources needed to manage MPAs and describe agreements between jurisdictions on management responsibilities and cost-sharing.

Challenges for industry in addressing MPAs

Industry needs to acknowledge ongoing changes in community values and demands with regard to the protection of the marine environment, and to recognize that MPAs have a role in addressing these needs.

One of the challenges for industry is to engage constructively in MPA planning processes by promoting its expertise and demonstrating how government could benefit from it. To be able to achieve this, industry needs:

- To be aware of the principles underpinning MPA development (e.g., ecosystem-based and precautionary management, habitat representativeness) and of associated government policies and procedures; and
- To develop a consistent and pro-active response to MPA development, reflecting industry principles and a commitment to environmental conservation.

In practice, the immediate issues for the Australian fishing industry are:

- To seek greater involvement from fisheries scientists and managers to ensure that conservation agencies understand the implications of MPAs on commercial fisheries and their management;
- To dedicate time and resources informing other stakeholders (including conservation groups) on fisheries issues and making alliances;

- To actively address fishing impacts (e.g., on habitats, by-catch species) and collaborate with scientists to assess the nature and extent of these impacts and associated risks for the environment, and
- To improve sharing of experience among fishing sectors and develop unified industry-wide positions to provide unbiased, relevant and timely expert information.

For more information

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