

MPA NEWS



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MPA Training in a Nutshell: Filling data gaps through partnerships

Editor's note: This recurring column, MPA Training in a Nutshell, distills advice from what is the largest and longest-running MPA management capacity training program in the world – the [International MPA Capacity Building Team](#) (IMPACT). Run by the US National MPA Center (within NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries), the program has trained thousands of MPA managers in more than 40 countries. MPA News profiled IMPACT in our [July 2015 issue](#).

Anne Nelson co-leads IMPACT. In these columns, Anne is sharing quick and useful tips – best practices gathered by IMPACT from MPA managers worldwide.

By Anne Nelson and the IMPACT team

How many times have you had a discussion on the potential impact of future human activities in your MPA and the conclusion is, "We don't have enough information on that species, habitat, use, or impact"? Often the reasons for the data gaps are that there is no funding for data collection without a related project, or not enough capacity, or it's not in someone's plan of work to focus on the activity and there's no direction from leadership to do the work.

Unfortunately this means that when a new use of the MPA's resources arises – like a proposed increase in tourist boats, or port expansion, or new ocean energy project – the time allotted to assess impacts is often not enough to produce sufficient data from scratch.

Think of right now as an opportunity to get prepared. There is often more data available than you know. Think creatively and reach out to new potential partners. Here are a couple examples for inspiration:

- [Cetacean rapid assessment: An approach to fill knowledge gaps and target conservation across large data deficient areas](#) This project integrated cetacean data from visual, acoustic, and interview surveys with multiple other existing data sources to produce a rapid assessment of cetacean abundance, diversity, and threats in Tanzania.
- [Filling historical data gaps to foster solutions in marine conservation](#) This study discusses several unconventional sources for filling data gaps (menus, newspaper articles, cookbooks, museum collections, artwork, benthic sediment cores), novel techniques for their analysis, and opportunities for integrating these data sources into conservation and management.

It also helps to have a group of managers and partners who see the value *inproactively* collecting data, even if a particular human activity or ecosystem feature is not a current focus of management. The goal is to be ready for any decision-making that may arise for the MPA managers. Give yourself a head start!

- Build relationships with university and agency researchers examining issues similar to the MPA's resources. There may be unpublished literature or data available on, say, species distribution, fisheries, or economic valuation. There could also be interest in developing a joint research proposal, or a group of graduate students ready to support your data collection.
- Having good baseline data is essential for effective long-term management of protected areas. It's never too early to start collecting and processing those data.
- Knowing about and participating in the early planning for any new project or process that could impact your MPA is critical. Your engagement helps to ensure that decision-making considers and ultimately protects key species and habitats of your site.

For more information:

Anne Nelson, on contract to NOAA National MPA Center. Email: anne.nelson@noaa.gov; Web marineprotectedareas.noaa.gov/nationalsystem/international/

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