

MPA NEWS



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MPAs, COVID-19, and the coming financial crisis: What impacts are practitioners already seeing, and how are they responding?

The world is still in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It could continue for several more months, and perhaps longer. And with much of the world's economy curtailed right now to fight the virus, there is a growing likelihood a global recession will follow. The coming year will be challenging for the whole world, including MPA practitioners.

The MPA field is already seeing impacts, from steep declines in tourism and volunteers, to cuts in budgets and staffing, to increased poaching at some sites. In some ways this is reminiscent of the global financial crisis in 2008-2009; back then, [MPA News asked several practitioners](#) what they expected from the financial shock and how they were planning for it. Their responses remain useful.

Yet this time is also different in many ways. Social distancing and stay-home requirements add new challenges for management and monitoring. Practitioners are now forced to work remotely, which is a big change for many. And the constant threat of infection, illness, and death adds a facet that the darkest days of last decade's financial crisis did not match.

The MPA field must prepare and adapt as best it can. The coming weeks and months are sure to yield many insights on how institutions can best survive the coronavirus pandemic and financial crisis. MPA News has started gathering evidence and guidance from practitioners, below.

We must be laser-focused on actions to keep our institutions and work afloat

Editor's note: Nirmal Jivan Shah is CEO of Nature Seychelles, which operates the Cousin Island Special Reserve in Seychelles. For more insights from him on the business case for conservation in the time of COVID-19, [click here](#).

By Nirmal Jivan Shah (nirmal@natureseychelles.org)

"There is a major difference between the 2008 financial crisis and now. The 2008 meltdown was a global banking crisis precipitated by irresponsible risk taking. It was a purely financial crisis, and governments dealt with it largely through huge bailouts of companies. Today, however, greed is not the core problem. Instead we are faced with a socio-economic crisis of incredible proportions causing disruptions at all levels (global, national, local) that could last for a long time. Bailouts in and of themselves will not solve the problem.

"In Seychelles we are in for a very difficult time because of our heavy reliance on tourism and the fact that 95% of our exports are fish to largely European markets. The disruptions in global markets and supply chains are far deeper and more complex than in 2008-2009. Conservation, including protected areas in this country, relies almost solely on tourism revenue for recurrent budgets. The upside is that there may be opportunities now to push for and support greater sustainability in fishing and marine tourism.

"I believe that none of us, especially those managing protected areas and other field-based conservation programs, can continue to proceed under a business-as-usual scenario in the age of COVID-19. The crisis has changed conservation and will continue to change it. Government, NGO, and private-sector paradigms will need to shift dramatically, as simply keeping the lights on may be a challenge. Those who don't anticipate the shift will disappear.

"The future of conservation, I think, will lie in disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, blockchain and cryptocurrencies. These can help us increase efficiency while reducing expenses, as has already happened in commerce and industry. Traditional conservation will need to leapfrog into what we can call 'e-conservation', a brave new world but whose foundations are already built. Conservationists will move from being tech consumers to tech drivers and innovators.

"In the meantime, any activity for us now has to be laser-focused on short- to medium-term actions to keep our institutions and our work afloat. The global MPA community will need a lot of practical assistance to undertake existing work. And new activities will be impossible unless they come with substantive new funding, be that traditional money or cryptocurrency. In coming months, the attention span of governments, the private sector, and the public toward conservation is likely to be low. The key question we should be asking ourselves is: How do we remain relevant in the age of COVID-19?"

Adapting on the fly to staffing and program challenges

Editor's note: Emma Doyle coordinates MPAConnect, a learning network of Caribbean MPA managers. MPAConnect is managed through a partnership between the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI) and the Coral Reef Conservation Program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

By Emma Doyle (emma.doyle@gcfi.org)

"When the pandemic started, there was immediate concern within the MPAConnect network about the loss of tourism-related revenue. Among our network sites, about half of the funding comes from tourism-related sources.

"The managers are approaching staffing and field presence differently in different locations. Some have lengthened staff shifts at remote locations and allowed families to join the staff and live in isolation, while others have kept skeleton staff only or have shut down their parks completely. Many staff face salary reductions to try to balance park budgets. Managers don't want to lay off staff that they've invested time, energy, and expense in training, and who will be needed again in future as national economies rebound.

"It's a challenge to continue enforcement patrols for most sites, but at the same time there is an increase in poaching and there are general security issues to deal with. Some MPAs are [increasing their use of drones](#) for surveillance. Curfews are a particular challenge as fishers are still allowed to fish but the movement of field staff to their stations and on patrol is being restricted in some countries. Curfews are also limiting sea turtle monitoring activities, with extra hoops to jump through to get exemptions from police.

"Public consultation meetings are prohibited and keeping programmatic activities going, like education and coral monitoring, is a challenge. Some of the more mature education programs are converting to online activities. Dive shops that previously donated tanks or refills for monitoring are now charging MPAs for these. And this is right when stony coral tissue loss disease is affecting Caribbean reefs – a challenge to monitor and treat. (Granted, there are also parallels between that disease and COVID-19, so perhaps this is an opportunity to communicate about coral disease.)

"There is concern for local livelihoods and potential impacts on fishers from market changes. Some of the MPA managers have done good work in recent years on sustainable livelihood options with communities associated with their MPAs. That experience is now handy to share with affected fishing and tourism allies.

"For some MPAs, this is an opportunity to focus on maintenance work and back-of-house activities, and to take stock of management plans. Some have developed specific COVID response plans for their organizations, and all are thinking about the health and safety of their teams."

MPA monitoring organization loses its volunteers and financial base

Editor's note: Alan Kavanagh is Research Manager and Conservation Coordinator for Marine Conservation Philippines (MCP). MCP is a non-profit NGO that works with local government units along the Southern Negros coastline of the Philippines to collect long-term data on MPA effectiveness. The organization relies heavily on international volunteers to conduct the monitoring work (diving twice a day,

six days a week) and for revenue, as the volunteers pay MCP a fee to participate and receive training.

By Alan Kavanagh (alan@mcp.email)

"We are used to having 30+ volunteers at any one time collecting seasonal data on the effectiveness of MPAs in maintaining livelihood security for fishing communities. But in mid-March, as travel within the country was starting to shut down, and as local communities banned diving activity for the time being, we had to release all our volunteers. Due to island quarantines, we also no longer had access to a recompression chamber, so we had to stop diving anyway.

"We are now a skeleton staff. It is heavily impacting our data collection for this season. There will be a gap for this time period running from March through May and potentially even longer, depending on the phased easing of curfews and regulations.

"The decline in MCP revenue from losing our volunteer base has follow-on effects for the local communities. MCP donates 13% of its income to local charity work, and an additional 2% goes to supplementing the salaries of local protected area wardens. With a lack of MCP income for the foreseeable future, this has strained the local community. To help counteract this, MCP ran a donation program via social media and was able to purchase and distribute over seven tons of rice, the main food staple here, to local communities. Many of the donations came from former MCP volunteers and their families. We were overwhelmed by the response from donors – we never expected so many people to donate.

"Our goal is to hit the ground running once we are able to run our activities at full capacity again. We are in the belief that everything hinges on when a vaccine becomes available. The people who come and volunteer with us are not typical vacationers. They are generally younger and more travel-oriented than the average tourist – often with fewer financial responsibilities, fewer social obligations, and flexible career prospects. In this way, our volunteers may well return more quickly than other segments of tourism that rely on an older demographic, who dive for pleasure and spend a good portion of their salary on a single annual holiday. With many typical tourists being furloughed from their jobs for an extended period of time, this will no doubt continue to impact the mainstream tourism industry for years, until people feel they are once again financially secure enough with disposable income.

"In the absence of a vaccine, it will depend on when it becomes safe enough to travel again and when people can trust that they will not be putting themselves and their families at undue risk. We are almost certain that our activities will not be resuming until at least the last quarter of 2020."

Long-term financial management of Dutch Caribbean MPAs will need to change

Editor's note: Kalli De Meyer is a long-time consultant on MPA planning and management, based in the Dutch Caribbean. Formerly she was Manager of Bonaire National Marine Park.

By Kalli De Meyer (kallidemeyer@me.com)

"The coronavirus is already having a significant impact on marine parks throughout the Dutch Caribbean. Non-essential work has simply stopped. The island of Saba has been under a shelter-in-place notice for weeks and the Saba National Marine Park is unable to keep up much semblance of day-to-day management, although they did receive a special permit allowing them to maintain their coral nursery. The Bonaire National Marine Park has been coping with substantial influxes of Sargassum seaweed during an island-wide lockdown, and fishermen on Aruba are already petitioning to be allowed to resume spearfishing.

"Our beaches and reefs are empty, and so are our pockets. For now, private philanthropy and food banks are providing essential food for vulnerable families while restaurants have been donating food packages and setting up soup kitchens. But for how long? We have to expect the pressure on our marine resources to increase as people struggle to put food on the table.

"Against this backdrop, marine parks in Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius have been able to benefit from financial aid from the Dutch government, which includes 80% wage subsidies for employees. But marine parks in Aruba, Curaçao, and St. Maarten – islands that are no longer special municipalities of the Netherlands – are having to go it alone. In the short term, salvation is coming from the Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance (DCNA), a regional network set up by parks 15 years ago that established a trust fund. Revenues from that trust fund have been redirected to buffer the loss of income from tourism.

"Financially the future looks bleak. So far, I see cuts being made in work plans and budgets, not in jobs. But it is unclear how long Dutch subsidies will continue, and how long it will take for tourism to resume once travel restrictions ease. Parks are in dialogue with government to try to mobilize support for nature-based solutions, which could provide employment and address long-standing issues such as the need for reforestation, coral farms, and similar.

"The long-term financial management of marine parks in the Dutch Caribbean will have to change, and the need to diversify income streams and secure structural funding for our parks has never been greater. Unfortunately it comes at a time when economies are down. Also, marine parks in the Dutch Caribbean generally don't qualify for funding support from US foundations and are ineligible for international funds such as USAID, World Bank, and the Global Environment Facility.

"I think everyone in our sector – large and small – is going into 'hunker down' mode. It's very hard right now to see what the end game will be. Perhaps the most important thing we can do right now is to collectively emphasize the importance of marine parks and their essential role in a sustainable future."

This is an opportunity for governments to help fishermen support MPAs

Editor's note: Marine biologist Javier Corcuera was formerly the CEO of WWF in Argentina (Fundación Vida Silvestre) and occupied several governmental positions in that country. He is now an independent researcher and consultant on sustainable strategies of states and the private sector.

By Javier Corcuera Quiroga (javcorcuera@gmail.com)

"This pandemic is putting countless marine jobs at risk. Many fishermen, whose markets for their products have dried up, are envisioning abandoning the activity. This would be a significant loss for their countries and communities.

"I believe there is an opportunity for governments to help fishermen come back to their jobs in return for improvements in their practices, including support for MPAs.

"Fishing nations, as well as FAO, UN Environment, and other UN institutions, should combine efforts to build a trust fund focused on recovering fishermen's jobs affected by COVID-19, and to do so under the [UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 targets](#). Such a fund could help fisheries authorities to apply standardized indicators to measure the direct and indirect jobs lost by harbor, country, and fishing region. At the same time, they would develop pilot projects to address job recovery in relation to wise use of fish productivity adjacent to MPAs. These projects should result from wide consultation in each fishing harbor with the fishing sector, scientists, MPA managers, fisheries managers, economists, and other experts.

"Prior to this pandemic, there have been relatively few efforts to apply financial incentives to secure fishermen's support for MPAs. In these cases, usually fishermen (and policy makers) have perceived that these incentives are primarily focused on protecting marine life, and that the protections will add costs to fishing operations. However, if done now during the COVID-19 event, we would focus first on recovering the fishing jobs, while better managing and protecting marine ecosystems at the same time. We have a unique opportunity to match their deepest need.

"There are potential risks, of course. In order to recover the fishing sector's activity, countries might be inclined to apply subsidies to ensure fishermen regain access to markets and to fish under more flexible, relaxed environmental standards. A lower oil price might also stimulate vessels to go to more areas, without control. We must develop these worst and best case scenarios to be prepared to help fishermen become more ecosystem-oriented, including as climate change alters key fish migration and distribution patterns in the coming decades."

Success of MPAs depends on support from stakeholders, whose priorities may be changing

Editor's note: Özkan Anil is the MPA coordinator for the Mediterranean Conservation Society in Turkey. The organization planned and oversees Turkey's first community-managed MPA, in Gokova Bay, and patrols other MPAs.

By Özkan Anil (oanil@yahoo.com)

"Our organization had emergency and continuity plans in place for underwater and surface accidents, marine/ground safety, forest fires, earthquakes, and other events...but not for a pandemic like this. Lesson learned!

"Most of our staff is working from home now, and locked down. We closed our main office in İzmir and three other area offices out in the field. We are not cutting back on staff, but we are postponing most field expeditions to mid- or late autumn.

"We have marine rangers who are patrolling the MPAs regularly against illegal fishing activity. Compliance seems to depend to some extent on where an MPA is located. For villagers and farmers in rural areas, who are confined to their small neighborhoods and communities, the sea is their only 'gate' to get some relief. So if an MPA borders their shore, they are definitely out there, and not in a receptive temper to receive a scolding from the rangers. In March, for example, one of these intruders yelled at a ranger, saying, "The world is dying of corona and you're still after the fishes! Get off..." On the other hand, if the MPA is nearer to towns or larger communities, people seem to be better enduring the forced limitations and are more respecting of the marine regulations. In any case, marine activity overall has gone way down. People are mostly indoors.

"Recovery will take quite some time. The success of our work depends on the continued support of our many stakeholders for sustainable marine management and conservation. These people – locals, fishers, government officials – will be affected by the pandemic. We will have to work very hard to carve our priorities on their agendas again. Over time we will get clues of what the future will be. We are in a kind of wait-and-see mood at the moment."

MPA that relies on yacht tourism revenue is optimistic for a rebound

Editor's note: Joseph Ierna Jr. is the administrator of the 455-km² Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park in The Bahamas. This MPA, designated in 1959 and a no-take since 1986, is one of the oldest marine parks in the world. An [essay by Ierna](#) in our July-August 2018 issue described plans for the park to become more financially sustainable.

By Joseph Ierna, Jr. (jierna@bnt.bs)

"The Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park has worked hard the past two years to transform from operating at a deficit to being financially sustainable. A breakthrough for us was when we started hosting special events – beach barbecues, live music, silent auctions – as a new form of revenue for the park. We did this by building relationships with the many yachts that visit the park as well as day-trip tour operators from Nassau (the capital city). For example, we hosted a beach barbecue for 100 persons and 25 vessels from a prominent US yacht club, charging per person for food, drinks, live music, and a set-up on the beach for a four-hour lunch. They also paid for their respective anchorages and moorings and visited our gift shop. The event generated US \$25,000 in revenue for us.

"Prior to the coronavirus, there were over 100 vessels in the park each day, and roughly 80% of our operational costs were covered by user fees – for special events, anchorage fees, and mooring fees. We had great numbers for January and February and were on track for a record year of revenue.

"Of course, since the pandemic, our vessel numbers have dropped dramatically. Now we might have seven vessels all day. During March, when COVID-19 restrictions were put in place for our parks and the country, our revenue fell to just 40% of the prior March (2019), and our April 2020 revenue was just 1.85% of the prior April.

"We are using this time to develop other revenue sources while examining how we can cut operating costs until vessel traffic returns to the park. New revenue sources we look to implement in the future include more food and beverage availability, expanding our retail gift shop, fixed penalties for violations in the park (we hope this will not become a big income source), and an additional 50 moorings. We were able to install 39 new moorings prior to COVID-19 restrictions in The Bahamas and plan to add the remaining ones this coming September.

"We are hopeful that our number of visitors to the park will return once the restrictions are lifted, but it will be gradual and who knows how long it will be. I actually think we may see a drastic increase in the number of very large private vessels. These users have the financial means to survive the dip in economy, and they will be seeking areas where there are fewer people. Just a thought."

Conducting fish surveys during this quiet time to understand the impact of people on MPAs

Editor's note: Ruthy Yahel is a marine ecologist with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. Simon Nemtsov is a wildlife ecologist and Head of International Relations for the same.

By Ruthy Yahel (ruthy@npa.org.il) and **Simon Nemtsov** (simon@npa.org.il)

"Israel has six marine reserves on the Mediterranean Sea. The government closed all parks and nature reserves when the COVID-19 outbreak started in late February. Since visitors to our marine reserves do not pay admission, we do not know exactly how many people are visiting them. However, the vast majority of human activity was stopped, i.e., no boating, no water sports, no swimmers or divers. And the number of people entering the MPAs from the coast, or fishing in them with rod and reel from the coast, was reduced to almost zero. Even outside the MPAs, recreational fishing was greatly reduced during this time.

"We have used this unusual quiet time to compare the abundance of groupers (*Epinephelinae*, *Serranidae*) to the already established baselines, in order to study how wildlife in these protected areas and nearby control sites is acting in the absence of human disturbance. This will help us understand the impact of people on the MPAs, and hopefully will help our agency to promote the designation of more MPAs. It may also convince our agency of the need to monitor the number of people entering MPAs, which we have not done till now.

"It took us less than a week to organize the MPA survey, which involved working at five different sites: one well-established marine reserve, three newly enforced marine reserves that until recently were paper parks, and one control site that is not a reserve. We conducted a SCUBA-based visual fish census, documenting grouper abundance along 25m x 6m transects at 38 survey points.

"Our results:

- In the three newly enforced marine reserves, we found an average increase in grouper abundance of 450% compared to a year ago.
- In the control area, we found an average increase of 325% compared to a year ago.
- In the 30-year-old, well-enforced marine reserve, we found no increase in abundance – it was stable compared to a year ago.

"The observed increase in grouper abundance might partly be related to an ongoing trend of growing abundance since 2015, together with the higher level of enforcement in the former paper parks. Our survey next year (April 2021) will suggest what portion of the increase can be attributed to the 'corona quiet period' at sea, and what can be attributed to the ongoing growth trend.

"Because we conduct surveys on a regular basis, we already had protocols ready to assess fish, benthic invertebrates, and algae abundance. But we were limited to conducting only a partial protocol for the recent survey; therefore, we measured only the abundance of groupers, which we consider as a bio-indicator species. The full protocol normally takes about 45 experts per site to be fulfilled, as well as several boats, skippers, and lots of logistics. This would have been impossible. The number of workers available was limited since many workers in our agency are on a forced vacation, and Tel Aviv University (our survey partner) also restricted the number of its employees who could participate. So we had a maximum of ten marine rangers and university people standing far away from each other on the shore, and a maximum of five people on each boat. Therefore, we chose the best indicator for human impact we could look at."

Partnering with law enforcement for increased patrols

Editor's note: Claire Arre is education and outreach coordinator for the Laguna Ocean Foundation in the city of Laguna Beach, California. The organization educates local community members about their marine environment, including the four MPAs that directly border the city and additional MPAs in surrounding areas.

By Claire Arre (claire@lagunaoceanfoundation.org)

"The city of Laguna Beach has closed its beaches. Since our entire education program is run at the beach, we are blocked from doing our normal jobs.

"Before the city closed the beaches, there was a general stay-at-home order issued by California Governor Gavin Newsom. But that seemed to be viewed as irrelevant to our beaches. When some of our volunteers went for a walk, they said the visitor numbers at the beaches were huge and there were a handful of MPA violations. This was why the city decided to close the beaches.

"The realization that people will not follow the rules – of both an MPA and the state governor – without our presence there is disheartening. We are now developing a more comprehensive plan with the Laguna Beach Marine Safety and Police Departments for when we are unable to be on the beach to educate local citizens, including increased law enforcement patrols. We are working out how best to help each other in times like this."

This challenge is likely to be harder than any before

Editor's note: Sibylle Riedmiller is founder/owner and director of Chumbe Island Coral Park Ltd. in Zanzibar. MPA News has featured Chumbe Island Coral Park several times over the years, including [here](#) and [here](#).

By Sibylle Riedmiller (sibylle@chumbeisland.com)

"Within just a few weeks of the start of this pandemic, we quite suddenly and unexpectedly find ourselves deprived of all income from tourism, which funds 100% of our budget. We had to close the ecotour and hospitality services on Chumbe Island, like nearly all tourism operators in the country, as bookings went to zero. There are no international flight connections available to Zanzibar and Tanzania until further notice.

"As we don't expect any income until at least the end of this year, we can only retain skeleton staff, mainly the park rangers. They will continue to protect the MPA and forest reserve. We are splitting our remaining limited reserves among the rest of our team in the form of a subsistence stipend while they take extended, otherwise-unpaid leave. We are working hard to stretch these resources to ensure we can maintain health insurance coverage for staff and their families.

"We have also launched a [crowdfunding campaign](#) to try to generate sufficient funds to get us through these challenging times, and to ensure the MPA and forest reserve remain protected and effectively managed.

"Some may applaud the reduction of CO₂ emissions as a consequence of the global grounding of airlines and lockdown of public life and the economy. But in many parts of the world that are dependent on tourism revenue – where for decades it was viewed as the best option for sustainable funding for protected areas – the impact of the pandemic is likely to be catastrophic to biodiversity conservation. The tourism sector may take years to recover, as economic recession and income losses in our source markets will result in new spending priorities for our customers.

"At the same time, the economic shocks and increasing poverty in nearby communities (where livelihoods are often also part of the supply chain for tourism, from farmers and fishers to handicraft makers) is already resulting in increased levels of poaching for bushmeat and unsustainable resource use. Meanwhile the drastic loss of tax income will force governments to revise spending priorities, with conservation likely to slide further down the list when not even generating tourism dollars anymore."

"We have faced many challenges, including the financial crisis of a decade ago, but this one is likely to be harder than any other before."

How is COVID-19 impacting your site?

MPA News will continue to report on the pandemic's impact on MPAs in the coming months. We want to know how the virus is impacting your MPA's planning and management, and how you are adjusting. For example:

- Are you cutting back on staff? Altering budgets or management plans? Halting or revising planning processes?
- If staff members are working from home, how is that impacting how management is done?
- Are you encouraging visitors? Blocking them? Providing virtual access in some way?
- Have you noticed if compliance levels are changing at your sites during the pandemic?
- Did you already have a Continuity of Operations plan in place in case of events like disasters or pandemics?
- Is the pandemic changing the way you think about marine conservation and MPAs?

Please send your experiences and insights to me directly (john@octogroup.org) or post them to the MPA Discussion List (mpalist@list.openchannels.org).

Thanks!

John Davis
Editor

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