

MPA NEWS



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New book analyzes two sides of the marine reserve debate: ‘nature protectionists’ vs. ‘social conservationists’

A new book on the science and advocacy of MPAs examines the rise of no-take marine reserves as a popular tool on the marine conservation agenda over the past 20 years, and how that political ascent occurred, including through papers in scientific journals. The book, *The Controversy over Marine Protected Areas: Science Meets Policy*, analyzes what it describes as the two sides of marine reserve politics: “nature protectionists” (NPs), who argue for an extensive network of no-take areas, and “social conservationists” (SCs), who argue for conventional fisheries management complemented by certain spatial restrictions to protect spawning areas of target fish or biodiversity.

The book suggests that the NP side wields significant political power, with influential scientific papers and the backing of large advocacy organizations. MPA News asked lead author Alex Caveen of Seafish (www.seafish.org), an administrative body that supports the UK seafood industry, about this. (The book is based on Caveen’s work as a doctoral student at Newcastle University [UK] - he received his Ph.D. in 2013.)

MPA News: Alex, your book suggests the NP side is fairly powerful politically. Yet less than 2% of the global ocean is in no-take marine reserves. In light of that, how powerful can the NP side really be?

Alex Caveen: It’s an important question. Certainly you would expect that if the NP had actual power it would be reflected in more of the global ocean being designated as marine reserves (MRs). Arguably, you could say SCs still hold the upper hand in the debate as policy-makers will typically prioritize social needs (e.g., employment) over protection of the environment.

One of the arguments we were trying to make in the book was highlighting the transfixion of the scientific community on marine reserves, and the ethics of scientists becoming drawn into advocacy. The NPs seem to have misleadingly represented MRs as panaceas, often framing the debate between NPs and SCs as one that can be resolved empirically, and viewing politics rather disparagingly. However, politics fundamentally means compromise in achieving one’s goals. There has to be understanding on both NP and SC sides to accommodate each other’s viewpoints, as well as thinking how best these could be reconciled through different types of spatial management, which could range from marine reserves to multiple-use MPAs.

No doubt some NPs view percentage targets of ocean to be fully protected necessary to create political momentum for their objectives. Debate however becomes confusing when NPs start suggesting that such targets have a scientific underpinning. Taking this latter stance ignores recent evidence that human activities in the seas tend to be much more clustered, with significant amounts of sea actually not being used. Here is the dilemma facing the NP community: do you establish an MR in an area of sea that is actually not used, or do you establish an MR in an area that is used and thereby cause displacement of the human activity onto a site that was previously unused? Of course the answer to this depends on 1) your objective for protection, and 2) the availability of local information to ensure a high likelihood of meeting your objective. As we suggest in the book, lack of clear planning objectives and the availability of robust local information often compromise this analytical approach to site designation.

Dogmatic adherence to percentage targets can also be counter-productive because they incentivize meaningless decisions to meet targets, often leading to expedient decision-making rather than encouraging meaningful dialogue over the impacts of different types of human pressure on marine ecosystems, and how these risks can essentially be better managed. Window-dressing MRs/MPAs as panaceas also detracts from more fundamental problems in fisheries management such as lack of enforcement and IUU fishing.

For more information:

Alex Caveen, Seafish, UK. Email: Alex.Caveen@seafish.co.uk

Alex Caveen’s co-authors on the book were Nick Polunin, Tim Gray, and Selina Marguerite Stead, all of Newcastle University in the UK.

The eBook version of *The Controversy over Marine Protected Areas* is available for £34.99 (US \$54) at www.springer.com/gb/book/9783319109565

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