

MPA NEWS



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Perspective: Key lessons learned on public participation from the process to rezone the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

Editor's note: Jon Day served as one of the directors of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) for 16 years, from 1998-2014. Initially he was responsible for conservation, biodiversity, and world heritage. In that position he commenced the Representative Areas Program, a multi-year rezoning process for the 344,400-km² Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Jon is now at James Cook University.

The paper that he excerpts here, from *Coastal Management* journal, is also synopsized in a [one-pager produced by the MarXiv research repository](#) for marine conservation science and marine climate science. MarXiv is a service of [OCTO](#), which also produces MPA News.

By Jon Day

The Representative Areas Program (RAP), which rezoned the entire Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in a single planning initiative, was at the time the most comprehensive process of community involvement and participatory planning for any environmental issue in Australia. The outcome was that one-third of the Marine Park was declared as highly protected no-take zones in 2004, with the remainder of the park also zoned to provide various levels of protection.

Many of the lessons learned from RAP remain relevant today. The following 25 lessons are excerpted from a paper published in *Coastal Management* journal in December 2017, "Effective public participation is fundamental for marine conservation – lessons from a large scale MPA". The paper is [available for free here](#). More detail on each of the lessons is in the paper.

A. Lessons to be considered at the commencement of a planning program

1. Ensure all stakeholders know the reason(s) why the planning process is happening, why they should be involved, and how they can get involved.
2. Assume everyone does not have the same knowledge/information base. Keep the messages simple (as far as possible).
3. Ensure anyone who is affected or interested understands the planning process, when they should get involved, and any constraints on the process.
4. Ensure your stakeholders understand the key issues and key terms that will be used during planning. The process may need non-technical language and/or graphics to explain complex issues.
5. Clarify the clear objective of the planning (e.g., in RAP's case, it wasn't about managing fishing; it was about protecting biodiversity). And don't promise what you may not be able to deliver.
6. The media can be a great and influential ally – or a fierce and critical opponent. Therefore a trained media spokesperson on your team who knows the topic and how to present well is an advantage.
7. Most planning processes require political approval at some stage. Start early. Don't wait until the end of the planning process to get political buy-in. Note also that the timelines favored by politicians are often incompatible with comprehensive planning processes.

B. Lessons that apply throughout a planning program

8. Public engagement (both formal and informal) needs to happen throughout the entire planning program, not just during the formal/statutory times.
9. Be prepared to refute contrary claims and misinformation. Address these as soon as possible, as leaving such claims can exacerbate the problem.
10. As far as possible, avoid public meetings. Recognize the 'noisy minority' usually does not represent the silent majority (see also #11).
11. Don't ignore those stakeholders who choose to remain silent. Consider ways to understand and collate their views.
12. Recognize you may be dealing with issues that may impact someone's livelihood. This is a critical requirement: a good understanding of relevant industries is reassuring for those who think their livelihoods might be affected.
13. Reiterate to all stakeholders that, in terms of the submissions, it is not a numbers game.
14. Expect there will be conflicts sometime during your planning process.
15. Recognize that scientific knowledge is often provisional, uncertain, and incomplete.
16. Utilize a mix of traditional and local knowledge, formal scientific knowledge, and expert knowledge.
17. Provide feedback, and show the public that their comments do make a difference. It is also important to be able to show these changes arising from comments to decision-makers.
18. There is rarely a 'win-win' in complex planning tasks. Compromises are often the only possible outcome.
19. No successful public engagement campaign can be conducted solely from within your office.
20. 'Expect the unexpected,' and ensure there is sufficient flexibility in your planning process to cope.

C. Lessons to be applied if/when required in a planning program

21. A two-way flow of knowledge is essential, so create a conducive environment for effective engagement (e.g., community information sessions).
22. Think carefully what you ask in any submission form. Open questions are very hard to code and quantify.
23. It is easier to ask specific questions about a map with areas or blocks that are pre-marked and numbered than to have to code individually submitted maps.
24. Assuming you do engage effectively, be prepared for more submissions than you expected.
25. Recognize many stakeholders are wary of 'black-box' models they do not understand, like analytical decision support tools. Nor is it possible to get all the necessary planning variables into such models.

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