

MPA NEWS



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Perspective | New management concepts at one of the world's oldest MPAs: Building financial sustainability for the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, The Bahamas

Editor's note: Joseph Ierna Jr. is the Administrator of the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park in the Caribbean nation of The Bahamas.

By Captain Joseph Ierna Jr.

The business of marine protected areas is as diverse and complex as the environment we are managing. Through word association, here is a small glimpse of what we may encounter on a daily basis in one of our national parks:

Staffing, budgets, maintenance logs, patrol logs, standard operating procedures, ethics, conservation, research, education, science, technology, tourists, locals, private islands, big boats, little boats, moorings, anchorage, weather, currents, patrol, drones, CCTV, internet, satellite, vessels, groundings, firefighting, missing persons, illegal activities, poaching, theft, drugs, invasive species eradication, funding, government, grants, philanthropy, filmmakers, MOUs, generators, watermakers, renewable energy, waste management, pollution, plastics, and much more!

Recently I was afforded the great honor to serve as the Administrator of the 455-km² Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park (ECLSP) here in The Bahamas. This national park, designated in 1959 and a no-take since 1986, is one of the oldest marine parks in the world. It is managed by the Bahamas National Trust (BNT), an NGO that operates The Bahamas' entire 8900-km² national parks system.

Prior to my position with the ECLSP, I led an effort – still underway – to plan a financially sustainable MPA from the ground up: the Long Island Marine Management Area, also in The Bahamas. The concept is that MPAs should be run more like the private sector, namely by serving customers' needs – as well as the ecosystem's – and generating revenue in the process. [Editor's note: [MPA News profiled this effort in a 2015 article.](#)]

Similar ideas can be applied at a long-established MPA like the ECLSP, too. That is what we are looking to do. The ECLSP costs roughly US \$750,000 to operate annually but currently runs a \$300,000 deficit. And needed re-development of the park's infrastructure – including new buildings and lab space, repairs to existing structures, additional vehicles and vessels, and new energy and communications systems – will cost an additional \$4.6 million. New revenue is necessary.

Aligning parks and the private sector

So how can we generate the new revenue? For that matter, how can protected areas worldwide – which all too often have inadequate funding – generate new, self-sustaining revenue streams?

One viable path is for protected areas to align with private sector projects. Through such partnerships, revenue from private sector partners is fed into protected areas' conservation efforts. In the case of the ECLSP, for example, natural partners could include the yachting industry, filmmakers, and scientists willing to pay a fee to work in a healthy ecosystem with high-quality lodging and lab space. The park already generates fees from mooring, anchorages, and camping but can do more. We need to get creative about identifying these partnership opportunities and bringing the protected areas and private sector communities together.

In recent years, the ECLSP has explored many ideas about public-private partnerships. But concerns about the perception of putting business interests ahead of natural resource protection have led this to remain a largely untapped funding mechanism for the park.

However, in the past five months of operations, as Park Administrator, I have led negotiations with private sector players and we are now advancing these ideas into commitments of possible investment actions. Such partnerships represent advantages for both sides. The private sector partner would receive access to operate in one of the most beautiful places in the world – with strong accountability measures built in. The park would gain funding needed to purchase equipment, strengthen infrastructure, and build staff and operations capacity.

Challenging the private and public sectors to fund parks

We have an opportunity before us to make a difference for future generations. It is time to take the next step and challenge private and public sectors to direct funding resources to operate our protected areas. We need to identify the economic incentives. I am encouraged here at the ECLSP: we are on the forefront of setting standards in operating financially sustainable national parks, including eventually across The Bahamas' national system of 32 sites. This is the future for protected areas.

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