

MPA NEWS



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Perspective | What protecting the ocean can teach us about police brutality

By John Bohorquez

Editor's note: John Bohorquez is a Ph.D. candidate at Stony Brook University (US), where his research focuses on sustainable finance and economics of MPAs, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. He is also a technical specialist with the Conservation Finance Alliance and a citizen of the US and Colombia.

In this essay, John refers to the murder of George Floyd by police in the US, and the ensuing widespread street protests against police brutality – both in the US and countries worldwide. MPA News and OCTO strongly support these protests and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Sometimes you can find insight in surprising places. As a graduate student who studies marine conservation and protected areas, I admit I found myself asking after the murder of George Floyd, "How could my work possibly be more useless right now?" It's difficult to stay focused when there are so many other issues afflicting the world. Even this year's World Oceans Week often felt like an afterthought.

But as this historic moment has developed, I have begun to see some parallels between my research in marine conservation and what disadvantaged communities in the US are protesting against just outside my door. How policing is conducted and how police are held accountable in each of these settings affects the wellbeing of all.

When marine protected areas (MPAs) are successful, they can help preserve pristine ecosystems, help degraded ones recover, and even enhance their resilience to impacts from climate change. But to succeed, MPAs need to be guarded and their regulations enforced by individuals or organizations including park rangers, navies, coast guards, the police, and other agents that may have legal authority over activities in the area. In other words, they need to be policed to some degree.

Anywhere there is policing, though, there is the potential for abusive enforcement. In extreme cases, conservation (especially when militarized) has been accused of driving the displacement or oppression of disadvantaged groups. These concerns resonate particularly closely to issues of police brutality and militarized police departments. A common complaint is in response to the political message that protected areas sometimes send to communities in developing countries, many of which are indigenous groups or former slave colonies.

"Fishermen don't like being told what they can't do," a man once told me on a Caribbean island I was researching for my dissertation. "Perhaps you'll understand this being Colombian," he continued. "People like us, we especially don't like it when it's a white man from the United States or Europe saying what we can't do." In many developing countries, protected areas have sometimes been viewed as forms of neo-colonialism, where wealthy countries from afar impose their interests on communities in ways that often restrict their access to local environments that have been important parts of their culture for generations.

I regret to say it is true: many conservation efforts have failed to adequately consider the concerns and knowledge of local communities. But the tide is changing. Research increasingly demonstrates the importance of positive communal relations and even participation in conservation management. For example, a 2018 study in Mexico found that MPAs that were co-managed by the government and local communities were more effective than exclusively federally controlled ones.

When done well, MPAs can benefit from good communal relations and participation in a variety of ways. Most MPAs have insufficient funds for management and enforcement, and communal participation allows for increasing the management capacity of protected areas beyond their budgetary limits. Community members can also offer generations' worth of experience and knowledge of the local ecosystems. And, perhaps greatest, there is less need to spend resources enforcing protected areas when people you might otherwise be enforcing against are your allies instead of your adversaries. These lessons can apply equally well to policing our communities.

In US communities, calls for "conversations" or "opening dialogues" – however well-intended – have not been followed up on and thus have done little to change the course of racial injustice and police brutality in recent years. It's time to take real action and seek and identify concrete ways to move forward.

With their many commonalities, including intersections with disadvantaged groups, developments in MPA management and enforcement could be looked to for improving policing elsewhere, especially on the importance of communal support and participation. Here are a few potential ways to accomplish this for police departments in the US that I believe are not only the right thing to do, but could also be practical towards better and more effective law enforcement:

1. Like many MPAs that have benefited from active participation from local communities, we need to increase the ownership and decision-making power that American communities have over how law enforcement is conducted on their streets. This includes opening more pathways for individuals to take a participative role in local governance. These measures go double for the Black community whose political influence has long been undermined by systemic racism.
2. Many MPAs invest heavily in stakeholder and community outreach to demonstrate the importance of healthy marine environments and how communities can benefit. In US communities, we need to expand current outreach efforts between law enforcement and local communities far beyond what is currently being done. Police departments should help communities understand the benefits of having a well-operating police force in their neighborhood, and also treat outreach efforts as opportunities to listen to and take feedback from local community members (and, of course, take action based on that feedback).
3. This is the most important, and a must for #1 and #2 to succeed: MPAs seek to provide a healthy marine environment for the benefit of life within and the people who depend on it. Enforcement and penalization are tools to help achieve this goal, but are not the primary objective. Similarly, law enforcement in America must ensure that the primary objective is to build a safe and positive environment for everyone in the community, including actively working to uplift oppressed groups. Enforcement and penalization must be treated as last resorts among the many other tools that can be used to work towards that goal. There are many more ways that police can support communities beyond making arrests that are consistent with the idea of "to protect and serve", and perhaps the importance of those other roles should be reinforced. Many police departments may be compelled to embrace those other roles amid calls for allocating their budgets to other public services. Furthermore, it is my hope that many individual police officers already embrace this mindset, and perhaps those men and women should be looked towards to help guide reform in their departments.

In the same way that marine conservation is a diverse field and no one solution is appropriate for every context, there is no one simple solution to tackle the problem of racial injustice in law enforcement in our nation. I by no means propose these three measures as a prescription for all problems related to policing and racial justice, nor do I expect they would be easy to implement. But as we look towards solutions to drive positive police reform and the dismantling of systemic racism, we must remember that we all have a stake in issues that affect even a subset of our communities. The fact that we can see the need for these changes – even in a field as seemingly distant from urban Black neighborhoods as marine conservation – tells me that what is happening on the streets of the US right now truly affects us all, and we have to solve it together.

For more information:

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