

MPA NEWS



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Perspective: What we wish we had known when we got started in the MPA field

Editor's note: Much of what we learn – in the MPA field and in life in general – comes to us informally. We receive advice from a colleague or from a stakeholder, or we figure out something ourselves. This kind of knowledge can be invaluable.

In this occasional feature in *MPA News*, we ask practitioners what they wish they had known when they got started in MPAs. This month's response is from Sibylle Riedmiller and Eleanor Carter. Sibylle (sibylle@chumbeisland.com) is founder/owner and director of [Chumbe Island Coral Park Ltd.](#) in Zanzibar, and Eleanor (ecarter@sustainablesolutions.consulting) is the park's former project manager and advisor to date. *MPA News* has featured Chumbe Island Coral Park several times over the years, including [here](#) and [here](#). The park's budget is funded entirely through ecotourism revenue.

By Sibylle Riedmiller and Eleanor Carter

When Chumbe Island MPA was first conceived in the early 1990s we could never have foreseen the kind of struggles we were going to encounter. Having such an original approach, with Chumbe being the first privately managed MPA in the world, we understood that it wasn't going to be easy. Building an ecolodge on a remote island, undertaking outreach, engaging and training community members to be conservation stewards, building capacity of former fishers to become environmental education specialists, introducing high-end hospitality skills into communities with little experience in this area — these were all challenges we expected and planned for.

What we hadn't expected was the entrenched mindset across both government and wider echelons of society that the marine environment was about extractive industries alone. Remembering this was the early 1990s, if we had been proposing a heavily extractive industry (e.g., fishing, mining, or physical infrastructure) it would have been easily understandable to all. But proposing to "utilize" the area for biodiversity conservation was met with distrust and confusion.

Even amongst the wider international conservation NGO community, the idea of setting up a privately managed MPA was met with a level of skepticism and resistance. It took enormous (and unexpected) advocacy, struggle, investment, and development to prove the value of the Chumbe concept – becoming the first (and to date one of the only) financially self-sustaining MPAs in the world.

Twenty years on, Chumbe flourishes, with a reef sanctuary boasting up to 86% live coral cover, and fish biomass in the park increasing by more than 750% in this period. The education program has reached more than 7400 schoolchildren, with off-shoot environmental clubs being established throughout Zanzibar.

Despite this success, however, the concept of privately managed protected areas (PPAs) continues to be met with some level of uncertainty in many corridors of power in conservation. This is a situation we wish we had both known and understood better from the start. And despite the increasing recognition of PPAs — through IUCN resolutions [no. 4.072 \(2008\)](#) and [no. 036 \(2016\)](#) particularly — greater understanding and advocacy continues to be required if PPAs are going to receive the recognition and support they deserve as an alternate and viable governance framework for conservation.

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