

# MPA NEWS



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## "We need to be talking about innovation": Insights from the World Economic Forum panel on MPAs and COVID-19

On 2 June 2020, MPA News moderated an [online panel discussion](#) on the impacts of COVID-19 and the financial crisis on marine protection. The panel was part of a global, week-long, online conference for ocean action – the [Virtual Ocean Dialogues](#), hosted by the World Economic Forum and Friends of Ocean Action.

The panel featured:

- Nirmal Shah, Chief Executive of Nature Seychelles, an NGO that manages the Cousin Island Special Reserve, an MPA;
- Marina Gomei, Regional Projects Manager for WWF's Mediterranean Marine Initiative; and
- Susanna Fuller, Vice President (Operations and Projects) for Oceans North, an NGO that supports marine conservation in Arctic and Atlantic Canada in partnership with Indigenous and coastal communities.

A recording of the discussion is not currently available to the public, but MPA News has excerpted the panelists' remarks here. Edits have been made for length and clarity.

### On the current situation with MPAs and COVID-19:

#### Nirmal Jivan Shah:

"Even before the pandemic, governments in the Western Indian Ocean were hard-pressed. Many of these governments are highly indebted, and many are struggling to achieve targets of the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). Now with COVID-19 and the financial crisis, some governments are talking about freezing some of the SDG targets. Government budgets are shifting to economic bailouts, food security, and so forth. In the Seychelles, for example, the government has promised to pay everybody a salary till the end of this year, which is incredible – that will consume almost the entire national budget. So I think a lot of former priorities, like marine protection, are going to be shelved for the time being.

"The public will turn more and more to the environment for sustenance. In my country [Seychelles] the local fishery, which is already heavily exploited, is now expanding as even marine tourism operators are going fishing to eke out a living. How long will it be before our friends turn into poachers?"

"The highest priority for us is to keep our MPA institutions afloat. If we don't do that, my fear is that many of the gains of the previous years could be eroded almost overnight, with irreversible damage. Where do we find money? The MPAs that have established trust funds or had investments may be lucky enough to dig into their savings for a period of time. Others that are government-funded could be resilient – until government's attention moves elsewhere. Some MPAs that have donor-funded projects may keep activities going, but often such donors do not fund recurrent budgets.

"Our staff is our most important resource. Unfortunately, MPA managers like myself are on the horns of not one but many dilemmas. Do we lay off staff? Who do we lay off? What happens when things get back to normal but we have lost trained and experienced staff? There are some very tough decisions to be taken. Leaner institutions will be needed, which means cost-cutting measures that include shedding of staff and assets – but not to the point where long-term harm is done to MPA management."

#### Marina Gomei:

"The work of WWF's Mediterranean Marine Initiative is very much directed to supporting the local communities working in MPAs in the region. Those communities that are most vulnerable are the ones that will be most impacted by COVID-19 and the financial crisis. We need economic development that takes into account the protection and recovery of biodiversity, because it is a fundamental economic asset.

"In the Mediterranean, we have MPAs that were already suffering before COVID from lack of funding and support from their governments. Although 10% of the Mediterranean is within MPAs, only 1.2% is in MPAs that have implemented a management plan. So our MPAs are facing many challenges.

"A guiding principle of our post-COVID work should be using an inclusive conservation approach. Only through shared responsibilities and management – with local communities – will we be able to implement successful conservation actions.

"The situation is challenging. The local tourist operators who operate in the Mediterranean's MPAs have seen the drop in tourism arrivals from COVID. Some related businesses have already closed, like small restaurants or hotels that are linked to the MPAs' tourism. And the small-scale fishers who operate in our MPAs are seeing the drop in local seafood demand because of the lack of tourists and the closure of the restaurants, as well as a drop in exports."

#### Susanna Fuller:

"Oceans North, the NGO where I work, prides itself on being able to pivot quickly. When social and economic activity started to shut down in the middle of March in Canada, we immediately rethought how we supported the communities we work with. We decided the money we spent on travel, for example, could be better deployed within those communities. So instead of having Oceans North scientists from southern Canada go to the north as planned, we worked to employ people in those northern communities to conduct the research instead, in a way that helped further build capacity around monitoring and data collection.

"We also provided hand sanitizer and masks to Indigenous communities that may not have had access otherwise. We have been incredibly fortunate in Canada's Arctic that there have been no cases of COVID-19 so far. Hopefully it will stay that way as long as travel is restricted.

"This year, 2020, was billed to be the 'Ocean Super Year', including with an agreement on a new global treaty to protect biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Those negotiations were supposed to conclude by April 2020, but the end was postponed due to COVID-19. Oceans North is involved in the talks. Negotiating international agreements at a time of such geopolitical stress, and doing it remotely, is complicated. However, I know there are countries that are dedicated to making it happen."

### On the concept of operating MPAs more like businesses, with plans for management, contingencies, and revenue:

#### Susanna:

"Most of the MPAs on which we're working in Canada are new – they have been designated in the past five years. Many don't have management plans yet, much less business plans. Regarding the concept that MPAs should be run like businesses, I personally find that objectionable. I think treating nature like a business is part of the problem with the planet right now.

"That being said, there are inshore MPAs and offshore MPAs and the financial needs and requirements for each of those, as well as their conservation objectives and outcomes, are different. For coastal MPAs – particularly those that have depended on tourism to fund some of their monitoring, management, and research – those are going to be the most impacted by COVID, and would benefit from planning."

#### Nirmal:

"From a southern perspective, our organizations need to have a business plan, one where the outcome is not profit but conservation. If my organization did not have a business plan – with emergency funds we had set aside and a trust fund we built on our own – COVID would have run us into the ground already, like some NGOs are experiencing.

"Some of our objectives will have to be phased in more slowly. For example, Nature Seychelles' protected area has suffered coastal erosion due to climate change that has damaged our international research center on Cousin Island and some of the warden's infrastructure. The money that we raised to combat this coastal erosion is currently having to be used to support staff and recurring budgets.

"Cousin Island Special Reserve is heavily dependent on tourism for its revenue, and it is easy for people who are not ground-level managers to suggest we diversify income streams. But when national economies like those of so many small island states are themselves not very diversified, it is not easy. We must engage with governments, including to look at the possibility of establishing carbon taxes on economic activities that are still reaping profits. An idea I've floated recently is carbon-taxing the fleets of distant-water fishing nations extracting tuna in our waters, with the tax revenue going to support marine conservation.

"Ultimately the marine protection sector may have to undertake a complete restructuring to survive this crisis. We need to be talking about innovation. We need to start working with unfamiliar partners. We need to work with tech companies, social marketers, behavioral economists – people we've never worked with before to be able to develop new funding ideas."

**Marina:**  
"The Mediterranean Marine Initiative is working with MPA management and with local communities to strengthen their combined business planning and capacity. We do this by connecting them to people who can help. One example is sustainable fishing tourism (also called pescaturism) where small-scale fishers take tourists out with them and use smaller nets than they normally would: this new form of tourism can reduce overall fishing effort in an MPA while earning revenue for the fishers. The fishers have little idea how to build such a business with the tourists; but by bringing expertise to them, we can help to jointly build sustainable economic activities that work for the future.

"We need to be flexible. Some months ago, for example, my team would not have thought it would be possible to organize Zoom calls with small-scale fishers in the region. Now those fishers are also using Zoom to develop site management plans with MPA managers. Together they are looking for alternative business solutions to the crisis – such as by promoting direct sales to individual buyers. Direct home delivery of fish increases the value of the product and reduces the influence of fishmongers."

## On making the case for MPAs despite the ongoing COVID/financial crisis:

**Nirmal:**  
"The MPA field is trying to convince decision makers that what we are protecting – marine protected areas – is national infrastructure that provides ecosystem services and supports the health of coastal communities. The argument is not difficult. But getting people to listen to it now amid the Tower of Babel environment where everybody's scrambling to survive, that's the challenge.

"How do we get people's attention? That's what I personally am trying to do with all my writings [like this](#) and all my running around to governments. All of us have to do that."

**Susanna:**  
"Prior to COVID-19, the world was already in a biodiversity crisis and a climate crisis, and we're still in those other crises. Can we take what we have learned from addressing COVID-19 – including responding to it in such a concerted and mobilized way – and wire that into how we're responding to the other crises? We already know that climate change and biodiversity loss are also about human wellbeing.

"As countries come out of COVID-19, their recovery has to be tied to addressing climate change and biodiversity loss. Those three things need to go together – they can't be separated."

**Marina:**  
"A healthy marine ecosystem is a fundamental basis for a thriving economy in the future. If we consume our marine assets – our marine *capital*, to use an economic word – then the recovery itself is not possible.

"In Europe, the [EU financial recovery package](#) has been tied to the [EU Green Deal](#) to ensure that green conditions and commitments that have already been made are actually implemented. However, WWF has stressed that clearer guidance is needed on the mechanisms of implementing and enforcing the green conditions of the recovery plan."

**Nirmal:**  
"I have personally pushed for greener deals and bluer deals here in the Seychelles. But we see now the government is encouraging more people to fish because it wants to reduce the nation's imports. The government has increased taxes on imports of foodstuffs, so more and more people are fishing, and more and more people are asking for fishing licenses. And the local fishery is at overcapacity already. Then you have industrial fishing: Europe may talk about a Green Deal, but they are still subsidizing their distant-water fishing fleets, and those fleets are coming here and [overfishing already-threatened yellowfin tuna](#)."

**Susanna:**  
"The marine conservation field needs to tie a healthy ocean to healthy human wellbeing, including the ocean's role in addressing climate change. We need to drive the narrative that the ocean is critical to human survival.

"It will be an uphill battle. Everybody with the privilege to be able to drive that narrative right now needs to do it, because there are a lot of other people who are struggling simply to survive right now. Those of us with the privilege need to carry that carefully and well."

## For more information:

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