EBM Perspective: Marine Spatial Planning and Ocean Industries

By Paul Holthus, Executive Director, World Ocean Council

The single most important factor determining the health of the ocean is the way business is done in the marine environment. As the tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico unfortunately demonstrates, the best-laid marine spatial plans or best-designed marine protected area can be severely compromised, if not rendered meaningless, by outside impacts on marine environmental quality in the protected area.

Whether it is the headline-grabbing accidents, or the multitude of major trends and minor incidents - a seafood species overexploited, an invasive species introduced, chronic oil spillage in distant waters, plastic garbage tossed overboard - injuries large and small from growing commercial use of the ocean are adding up to cumulative impacts. Improved regulations can have an important role to play, but are not going to save the ocean, as governments cannot monitor every action by every operator at sea.

Corporate Ocean Responsibility is an essential element of securing the future health of marine ecosystems: i.e., companies proactively identifying problems, undertaking credible risk assessment, and developing and implementing solutions based on good science. However, due to the dynamic, inter-connected nature of marine ecosystems, the best efforts by a single company or an entire industry will not be enough to address major and cumulative effects in the ocean "commons". The involvement of the full range of commercial ocean users is necessary to take on the problems facing the marine environment.

What does all this mean for marine spatial planning (MSP)?

MSP is expanding in use at a variety of scales and through a variety of government-led processes, usually with significant input from scientists and NGOs. Ocean industries - oil and gas, shipping, fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, etc. - are often the principal users of marine space and resources and thus are the most critical MSP stakeholders to be involved in the process. These familiar ocean users are being joined by newer players: e.g., offshore wind, ocean energy, carbon storage. Unfortunately, industries operating in the marine environment are often not systematically and comprehensively involved in MSP efforts.

Barriers to industry involvement in MSP include:

- Lack of understanding of the MSP "movement" and momentum;
- Limited engagement in the multi-stakeholder processes characteristic of MSP because industry is engaged in sectoral processes; and
- Lack of structure and processes engaging the diverse ocean business community in MSP in a systematic manner that identifies each kind of industry relevant to the planning area and specifically engages individual companies.

Without business involvement in MSP there is a significant risk that ocean management plans and governance will not fully consider existing and potential economic activities, their effects, cross-sectoral interactions, and cumulative impacts. MSP implementation can be improved by bringing together the range of ocean industries into a greater partnership between industry and the scientists, managers, policy-makers, government representatives and NGOs.

Improving MSP implementation, compliance, and science through industry involvement

Industry involvement in MSP has the potential to contribute to the successful development of ocean use plans. Implementing MSP may become stalled due to the lack of political will that may be associated with the lack of private sector involvement or support for the MSP process and results. Engaging a broad cross-section of ocean industries at the outset of MSP processes may increase the potential for industry - and political - support for effective implementation.

Successful implementation of MSP often ultimately boils down to commercial activities and operators complying with management conditions. Industry participation in MSP will increase the probability of private sector compliance with management in ocean areas that are often far from the government surveillance and enforcement capabilities.

Increased industry involvement in MSP can also contribute to better understanding of the science of ocean ecosystems. Many ocean industries have marine environmental data and scientists that could contribute to MSP. It is more likely these data will become available through constructive business engagement as a partner in an inclusive MSP process.

Industry support for, and participation in, ocean science can be enhanced though MSP. Business wants a predictable and stable operating environment. Improved ocean science can contribute to this. Industry involvement in MSP can create specific needs and opportunities for private sector partnerships in improving the ocean science that informs management options.

Informing, engaging the private sector in MSP

The World Ocean Council (WOC) is bringing together industries that use and impact the oceans to catalyze cross-sectoral leadership and collaboration in marine sustainability issues and approaches. A key area of effort for the WOC is encouraging and facilitating proactive, constructive industry involvement in MSP. We are working with the private sector to develop understanding in the business community of MSP and the associated issues, stakeholders and process.

As part of this, the WOC is organizing the Sustainable Ocean Summit (SOS) - 15-17 June in Belfast, UK (www.oceancouncil.org) - as an unprecedented gathering of a wide range of ocean industries around the theme of "Reducing Risk, Increasing Sustainability: Solutions through Collaboration". A special half-day seminar on "Marine Spatial Planning - What Ocean Industries Need to Know" will focus on MSP and the role of industry.

Through these efforts we hope to increase the understanding and involvement of the ocean business community in MSP and build the trust and relations with other ocean stakeholders needed to achieve a shared vision of a healthy, productive ocean and its sustainable use by responsible companies.

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