

## Communicating with Stakeholders and Communities: Specialists Offer Their Advice to MPA Managers

The long-term viability of a protected area depends on public support for it. Without broad-based backing of its goals, the protected area will have trouble meeting those goals. Building a base of support, whether from specific stakeholder groups or the community at large, requires MPA practitioners to be able to communicate effectively with their audiences. This involves not only what the practitioners say but how they say it, and especially how they involve the community in a dialogue.

This all takes some skill, and the growing number of publications on how to communicate on MPAs is evidence of the need for guidance on this subject (see box , "More guidance on communications for protected areas"). This month, *MPA News* asked a question to four communications specialists with experience in MPA planning:

**If an MPA practitioner came to you for advice on how to communicate effectively with stakeholders or the general public, what advice would you give?**

Here are their responses:

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### Be clear, specific, and creative

**By Liza Eisma-Osorio**

Executive Director, Coastal Conservation and Education Foundation (CCEF), Philippines

[Note: CCEF is a Philippine NGO that assists MPA-planning processes. It was profiled in our February 2007 issue on educating stakeholders about MPAs (*MPA News* 8:7). The CCEF website is [www.coast.ph](http://www.coast.ph).]

"First, make your message clear and specific. Even in cases where my organization, CCEF, is concerned with the protection of a large area and a host of issues, it is better to focus initially on one particular issue that the public or the stakeholders can easily relate to. This provides us with the opportunity later on to expand the message to include other significant issues in our coastal areas.

"We found, for example, that our campaign that focused specifically on mangrove conservation - which we called 'One Million Mangroves for Cebu' - got a lot of support from ordinary folks from all walks of life, as well as civic and private sector organizations. Although the project is focused for now on mangroves, its ultimate objective is to develop a collaborative spirit for protecting the coastal zone in general.

"Second, when creating information, education, and communication (IEC) materials, use local language as much as possible. It is also helpful to use popular education materials such as comic strips, which tell a story with implicit messages. [Editor's note: An example of how CCEF has used local language and comics to build support for MPAs is [available as a PDF](#).]

"Third, be creative and informative at the same time. Use entertaining events to communicate the message effectively. We use what we call 'the fishing game' to demonstrate the concept [and potential drawbacks] of open-access fishing. There are pictures of fishes posted in the room - under tables and chairs, behind curtains, on the walls, etc. The group is instructed to 'go fishing' and that those who catch the most fish will win. Usually, there is a fishing frenzy as a result. Afterward we process our observations with the group and explain the real objective of the game."

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### Science-based information can help address misconceptions about MPAs

**By Kirsten Grorud-Colvert**

Project Director, *The Science of Marine Reserves*, PISCO, and Marine Reserve Science Coordinator, COMPASS, U.S.

[Note: *The Science of Marine Reserves* is an educational booklet and video that provides up-to-date scientific information

about no-take areas in an accessible format ([www.piscoweb.org/outreach/pubs/reserves](http://www.piscoweb.org/outreach/pubs/reserves)). It was produced by the Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans (PISCO).]

"When a planner or manager approaches an audience to talk about MPAs, it is probably not the first time the audience has heard of marine protected areas. People have likely heard a wide range of promises and warnings [about what an MPA will do]. There are many misconceptions about MPAs, which is why it can be beneficial to bring science-based information to the discussion.

"Research published in peer-reviewed journals illustrates the measurable effects of MPAs. These studies are conducted to address a hypothesis and not to support a specific advocacy position. They provide detailed methods for critique, and they are reviewed by scientific peers.

"However, simply handing audiences a journal publication is not an effective way of communicating this sometimes complicated information to non-scientists. To provide science-based educational materials on MPAs to laypeople, it is helpful to think about giving four different levels of information. Each level builds on the last by offering more detail:

"1. First, and often most effective, is to present information through engaging pictures and graphics - pictorial representations of data that communicate a concept without using words.

"2. If the user wants to learn more, summarize the main messages of the study or concept in talking points that are two to three sound-bytes long. This short format helps to articulate the main messages clearly and concisely.

"3. If the user wants more information, expanded text can tell a story about the effects of MPAs, providing more details but still avoiding technical minutiae.

"4. Finally, citing and providing the original source allows the user to consult the technical literature for fact-checking."

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## **To build a campaign, start where your audience is**

**By Chris Rose**

President, Campaign Strategy Ltd., U.K.

[Note: Campaign Strategy Ltd. conducted a study for Natural England in 2007-2008 measuring English public perceptions of the marine undersea environment. That research has informed Natural England's campaign to raise public awareness of the marine environment and MPAs.]

"Do not assume there is one 'message' that will work for 'the public'. People are different. The tools you need depend on whom you need to convince and what you are trying to convince them about.

"Step 1: Decide who you need to talk to, and what you would like them to do. Effective communications has a purpose.

"Step 2: Start from where your audience is, not where you are. Get your organization to spend some money on doing qualitative research: uncover how people think about the subject and the sort of thing you want them to do; how you might inform them; what they might need to see, feel, touch, hear, experience; who might be the best messenger; and what might be the best channels and contexts to use.

"Step 3: Go out and organize this campaign. In other words, be proactive. Do not wait for a self-selected sample of community members to come to you.

"For Natural England we divided people up psychologically to study how they thought about the undersea landscape. All of them had no real idea what was there. Many assumed it was like the surface - 'featureless'...only slimier, colder, more dangerous. Looking for a common denominator, we found that while some loved the mystery of the sea (ignorance was no barrier), two other groups found that troubling. Instead, the two concepts that appealed to all groups were the undersea landscape's dramatic topography and living communities. For a description of the research for Natural England, go to [www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletters/campaignstrategy\\_newsletter\\_43.pdf](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletters/campaignstrategy_newsletter_43.pdf)."

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## **Use real-life examples to make points**

**By Toni Parras**

Communications Officer, The Locally-Managed Marine Area (LMMA) Network

[Note: The LMMA Network is a group of practitioners - traditional leaders, conservation staff, university researchers, and others - working to improve locally-managed marine areas in the Indo-Pacific through the sharing of experiences and

resources ([www.Immanetwork.org](http://www.Immanetwork.org)).]

"Communicating with stakeholders is very different than communicating with the general public. But if I had only one piece of advice on communicating with either group, it is this: Use real-life examples from people on the ground, so your audience can learn from their experiences. In my involvement with the LMMA Network, I have found that narratives from the field, using pictures and interviews with site-level people telling their story in their own words, are a very compelling and effective way to communicate to everyone - MPA managers, communities, the public, and donors alike.

"It is people in the field - and especially communities who are directly involved with and seeing the effects of MPA work first-hand - who have the richest lessons to share about what works and what does not, and possible input to solutions that are realistic for their sites. Using this approach, we have had excellent feedback from our Stories from the Field efforts ([www.Immanetwork.org/Site\\_Page.cfm?PageID=21](http://www.Immanetwork.org/Site_Page.cfm?PageID=21)) and our Lessons Learned video ([www.Immanetwork.org/Site\\_Page.cfm?PageID=67](http://www.Immanetwork.org/Site_Page.cfm?PageID=67)).

"Avoid using jargon, technical terms, acronyms, or too much theory and concept. Get down to real-life lessons using conversational speech. Pretend you are chatting with your grandmother or neighbor. The best way to communicate is to touch your audiences' heartstrings. You want the issue to resonate with them, to make them care about MPAs, and the best way to do that is to make it intimate, make it visual, make it compelling."

#### **For more information:**

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## **BOX: More guidance on communications for protected areas**

*Guidance For Good Practice For Communicating With Stakeholders On The Establishment & Management Of Marine Protected Areas* (OSPAR, 2008)

[www.ospar.org/documents/DBASE/DECRECS/Agreements/08-02e\\_MPA%20stakeholder%20communication.doc](http://www.ospar.org/documents/DBASE/DECRECS/Agreements/08-02e_MPA%20stakeholder%20communication.doc)

*Stakeholder Participation: A Synthesis of Current Literature* (U.S. National Marine Protected Areas Center, 2004)

[www.csc.noaa.gov/mpa/Stakeholder\\_Synthesis.pdf](http://www.csc.noaa.gov/mpa/Stakeholder_Synthesis.pdf)

*LIFE-Nature: Communicating with Stakeholders and the General Public - Best Practice Examples for Natura 2000* (European Commission, 2004)

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/publications/lifepublications/lifefocus/nat.htm#communicating>

Workshop: *Communications Skills for MPA Practitioners*, 17-19 May 2009, International Marine Conservation Congress, Washington, D.C., U.S.

[www2.cedarcrest.edu/imcc/MPA\\_U.html](http://www2.cedarcrest.edu/imcc/MPA_U.html)

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## **MPA Tip: On building public support for an MPA**

Below is advice adapted by MPA News from the book *Managing Protected Areas: A Global Guide* (IUCN, 2006). The advice is on how MPA practitioners can build effective partnerships with the general public:

**Tip:** Managers need to get better at harnessing public support to improve investment in, and commitment to, protected areas. To build that support, managers may benefit from employing these techniques:

- Have a clear message that is consistent at all levels of the organization;
- Ensure that any staff members who communicate daily with the public are good communicators;
- Celebrate successes widely and loudly (cultivating relationships with local and national media can help here);
- Keep in touch with supporters and let them know how much they are appreciated;
- Provide opportunities for people to be involved in protected area operations through volunteer programs, joint management with local communities, and "Friends of the Park" groups; and
- Be honest and realistic. This builds trust.

