

Communications and MPAs: How Practitioners Are Raising Awareness of MPA Issues

The field of MPA planning and management may still be young, but its collective body of knowledge is growing quickly, through academic journals, textbooks, conferences, and workshops. Nonetheless, familiarity with the concept of MPAs among other stakeholders -- including policymakers, fishers, and the general public -- is relatively low. While practitioners discuss topics such as mooring buoy placement or self-financing schemes, many in the general public remain unaware that "marine protected areas" even exist.

This month, MPA News examines how various practitioners are attempting to raise public awareness of MPAs for an array of purposes.

Lack of public awareness

A 1999 survey of attitudes among US residents toward marine protected areas found that only a third of those surveyed were aware that their federal government had established "marine sanctuaries". This was despite the fact that the US National Marine Sanctuary Program has existed since 1972, and that 13 sanctuaries have been designated. The survey, conducted by The Mellman Group for SeaWeb (a US-based project to raise public awareness of the ocean), additionally found that 43% of US residents believed that the ocean was a homogeneous body of water and that protecting one particular area of it from pollution or overfishing was useless, because anything done to one part would affect every other part.

Although the survey also found that public attitudes generally favored increased protection of ocean places, the lack of knowledge among US residents about existing MPAs or ocean systems was indicative of a relatively low level of attention being given marine resource management in comparison to terrestrial.

In this light, some campaigns in the US to foster the designation of MPAs have not only had to argue the merits of particular plans but also to raise awareness of the science of MPAs among policymakers and private citizens. One high-profile effort to do this was a national campaign by the Sea Turtle Restoration Project (STRP) to create a no-shrimping zone off the coast of the state of Texas. STRP is a member-funded project of the Turtle Island Restoration Network, a US-based NGO.

High-profile campaign

STRP's goal was to protect waters surrounding key nesting beaches for Kemp's Ridley turtles, an endangered species that can get caught in shrimping gear. STRP wanted the state of Texas to designate a year-round shrimp closure area -- to be called the Kemp's Ridley Marine Reserve -- out to 9 nautical miles from the coast of Padre Island, in South Texas; no other fishing activities in the area would be banned.

To get the state to designate the no-take area, STRP launched a multi-pronged campaign that included more than a dozen targeted media strategies. Among these strategies, STRP took out full-page advertisements in the national edition of the *New York Times* newspaper, and sponsored a resolution in support of the reserve that was signed by more than 500 sea turtle biologists and conservationists. The project collaborated with Texas newspaper editorial boards to co-author editorials favoring the reserve, and sent out direct mail, e-mail alerts, press releases, letters to public officials, and fact sheets. The project even sponsored a sea turtle art contest, from which children's drawings were prominently displayed in the state capital during an important week when the sea turtle issue was before policymakers.

In the end, STRP achieved what it views as an important first step: last month, Texas wildlife officials designated a seasonal closure (1 December - 15 July) for shrimping out to five nautical miles. STRP has indicated it will continue, and expand, its efforts to create a larger, year-round closure.

Each of STRP's methods was designed to target a particular audience, or audiences. The full-page advertisements in the *New York Times*, for example, reached policymakers, the general public, and other news media. From the start, STRP knew it would have to win the campaign on a national basis, said Teri Shore, director of the campaign. "If we stayed in Texas, where nothing had been happening for years, we would have gotten nowhere," she said. Incidentally, STRP is based in the state of California and has just five staffers. "In this day and age, you can do a lot of work long-distance by fax and e-mail," said Shore.

Asked why the project adopted such a high-profile campaign, Shore said public opinion could be a strong catalyst for change, and that it was a necessary and complementary component to the development of scientific, management, and regulatory processes. "Our tactics on this campaign weren't new for us, though maybe they're new to the marine reserve issue," said Shore, whose organization has worked on several international sea-turtle welfare issues. "We have raised public awareness of marine reserves nationally and we believe this will help scientists and managers do their work."

Bringing scientists, policymakers together

The latest scientific findings on MPAs, often published in academic journals with limited subscriberships, can sometimes take a while to reach policymakers. The COMPASS project, funded by the Packard Foundation, intends to speed up that information dissemination process in the US, particularly on the Pacific Coast.

COMPASS -- standing for Communication Partnership for Science and the Sea -- consists of four partners: SeaWeb, Island Press, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and a board of scientific experts led by Jane Lubchenco of Oregon State University. It is concerned with more than just MPAs; its overarching goal is to address stresses on the world's oceans by advancing marine conservation science and communicating its knowledge to policymakers, the public, and the media. Marine reserves, however, have arisen as one of the first topics for the project to tackle.

George Leonard, marine science coordinator for the COMPASS project, said one of the main goals of the project's MPA-related efforts is to serve as a convener for the discussion of issues and the development of explicit tasks. Along this line, in August, COMPASS convened a workshop of MPA experts from three sectors -- academic, NGO, and government. The group shared information on activities ongoing in the three Pacific coast states and heard the latest science on MPA design produced by NCEAS, the National Center for Ecological Assessment and Science, based at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

"The upshot of the meeting was that a rather detailed list of activities was created that could be achieved over a relatively short time frame," said Leonard. COMPASS has now created a committee to prioritize the items on the list, including activities for creating more MPAs and improving the effectiveness of existing ones.

"We wanted to bring the best people together to decide how to get things done, and we were able to do that," said Leonard. He credited several factors with allowing the project to attract the experts it wanted, including significant funding from Packard (which allowed the project to cover participants' airfare and hotel accommodations) and the assistance of dedicated staff to work on the project.

Communications at the local level

To garner local and regional support for MPAs, the phrase "seeing is believing" is the cornerstone of an approach taken by the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE), an NGO in Southern Belize. By taking Belizean, Honduran, and Guatemalan fishers to protected areas in Belize such as Hol Chan or Port Honduras, and then to unprotected sites both in Belize and beyond, TIDE has shown artisanal fishers how MPAs can increase fish stocks and protect habitat.

What started as a "show but don't tell" method has turned into a broader program of experiential learning and fisher exchanges, said Rachel Graham of the University of York (UK), who has assisted with the project. To date, TIDE has organized and funded six exchanges among fishers from Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala. For those fishers from Guatemala and Honduras, whose coastal waters are relatively depleted of fishery resources, seeing the abundance of fish and species in marine reserves has been enough to erase skepticism of the benefits of MPAs, said Graham.

"The fishermen often have a lifetime of knowledge of the marine environment and can readily judge for themselves the state of marine resources," said Graham. "The silent messages from such exchanges have a way of replicating themselves as fishermen relay their experiences back to their communities."

Raising community consciousness of marine conservation has also played a role in the work of Roberto Pardo Angel, a marine biologist and environmental educator on Colombia's Pacific Coast. Humpback whales come to Malaga Bay each year to mate,

and Angel helps organize workshops and training sessions about whale-watching regulations and whale biology. Two hundred boat owners and community members have received the training since 1994.

The local community has historically consisted of artisanal fishers, but has grown to appreciate the tourism opportunities associated with the whales. "Eight years ago, the community was afraid of the whales because they thought they [posed] competition for food," said Angel. "Now the feeling has changed due to the whale-watching activities. Also, the beaches are cleaner now for the tourists and for the environment." Activities by several NGOs and government agencies are now encouraging the designation of an MPA in the Malaga Bay area.

Fishing organizations

Fishing organizations have done their part to raise their own members' awareness of the MPA issue. The US-based Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) features a page on its website (www.pond.net/~pcffa/MPA.htm) with links to articles for and against MPAs, books on the topic, organizations advocating MPAs, MPA-related listservs, and information on specific MPAs and reserve programs around the world.

Another website, called eAngler.com, has covered the controversy over creating a no-take ecological reserve in the Dry Tortugas region of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary ([MPA News 1:1](#)). The eAngler.com site, operated by eAngler, Inc., a US-based corporation whose mission is to create, maintain, and continually improve "the world's ultimate online fishing resource", has featured pages of quotes from experts for and against the reserve plan (www.eangler.com/articles/content/887/887.asp).

Game to educate about MPAs

A unique tool for raising public awareness of MPAs is under development by the International Marine Mammal Association (IMMA), based in Canada. Called the MPA Puzzle, it is a board game that challenges players to simulate the process of designing and evaluating their own MPA within a multistakeholder group. The target audience, according to IMMA Education Coordinator Jan Hannah, includes grade schools, universities, ecotourist operations, field centers, zoos and aquaria, and even fishing cooperatives.

The goal of the MPA Puzzle is to guide players through the design and evaluation process in a relatively simple, non-threatening way, said Hannah. "We felt that a board game could accommodate the different learning styles and learning levels of our broad target audience," she said. "By simulating the process of creating an MPA using a board game, our hope is that the Puzzle will familiarize stakeholders with the process, prompt them to realize the importance of their role in the process, and bring them closer together." Despite the IMMA's focus on marine mammals, the game does not have a marine mammal slant to it.

In the MPA Puzzle, the success or failure of a group's MPA design is based on the group's ability to reach consensus on the overall management plan. To complete the management plan, the group must choose to implement zoning options or alternative conservation measures that it feels will improve the health of the marine area under consideration. The group then draws cards representing future events and situations, and evaluates the effects of these on the ability of their MPA design to protect the ecosystem.

The MPA Puzzle is undergoing testing now. IMMA expects to have the game ready for distribution from its Ontario office by Spring 2001.

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