

Interview with Marion Howard: Gender as a Factor in Community-Based MPA Work

Marion Howard is MPA advisor for CORALINA, a Colombian government agency that manages the natural resources and sustainable development of Colombia's San Andres Archipelago, designated by UNESCO in 2000 as the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve. Howard has been overseeing a project to develop a network of marine protected areas within the biosphere reserve, which has an estimated population of more than 80,000 people. Although not a Colombian, she has lived in the San Andres Archipelago for 25 years; she is the only non-national at CORALINA. MPA News interviewed her about how her project incorporates gender concerns in its work.

MPA News: How is gender a factor in your MPA planning processes?

MARION HOWARD: There is a "macho" culture here with conventional gender expectations. Therefore, in MPAs, gender is a factor when working with stakeholders and communities, which is a large part of our work. Conventional gender roles mean that women rarely work in the marine area - fishing, diving, or working with watersport businesses - and many never go in or on the sea. There are few women in the interest groups set up in the project, except in education and tourism. But in this society, women are vocal and active when included, so the challenge has been to develop mechanisms to ensure their participation. Some themes of our education program target women. Some of these are land-based threats to MPAs, household waste management alternatives, public health risks associated with loss of environmental quality, how to maintain health and productivity of coastal and marine ecosystems, marine ecosystem services, and MPA benefits.

As a foreign woman, for my work to be effective it has been important to accommodate my personal style, dress, manners, and language to the local context. Conforming to certain local expectations demonstrates my respect for community values, which in turn engenders trust and support for my work, much of which is new and sometimes inconsistent with local traditions. It is also useful to focus on possible advantages of local gender perceptions. Although sexist, the macho attitudes of men hinder them from becoming overly aggressive when dealing with women in professional or public situations. Mature women are treated with particular deference. When our MPA activities are led by women, participants have never become severely acrimonious or violent toward the MPA team, even when discussing controversial issues.

MPA News: CORALINA is principally led by women....

MARION HOWARD: At CORALINA, the leadership is almost entirely women, including the general director, general secretary, two sub-directors, and most coordinators. The MPA project professional staff has nine women, including myself and the project supervisor, and two men. This is not as unusual as it might appear on the surface. Characteristic of many disenfranchised ethnic minorities and colonized societies around the world, in this archipelago women are more likely to have regular jobs, carry the burden of family support, and take on social responsibility. Also, the environment is a new field that does not have the prestige or power associated with more established professions, so islander men who have the opportunity to become professionals tend to choose more customary fields like medicine, law, engineering, economics, or business administration.

MPA News: Has your position of leadership with CORALINA had an effect on the number of local women getting involved in activities related to the project?

MARION HOWARD: The women on the MPA project team are strong role models. Not only has the community mentioned this, but the MPA project includes an accredited technical degree program in collaboration with a local university. The goal of this program is to train islanders to work in the MPAs and other coastal and marine management jobs. Half the students are women, and to date they are more dynamic, ambitious, and academically successful than their male counterparts. Team members visit schools and youth groups, emphasizing careers in environmental sciences and management for women. In project management, we actively seek off-island training and conference participation for women.

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