MPA Perspective: Advice for Promoting Participation of Authorities and Stakeholders in MPA Planning

Note from the editor: Peter Jones, author of the perspective piece below, is a lecturer in coastal and estuarine management at the University College London (UCL), UK. In recent conservation agency funded research, he and colleagues evaluated the effectiveness of participatory planning processes for marine protected areas in the UK. Lessons drawn from these processes may be of general interest to MPA practitioners elsewhere, and reflect the importance of building trust and confidence among participating groups.

Jones adapted the piece below from a paper he co-wrote with Jacquie Burgess and Darren Bhattachary of the Environment and Society Research Unit, UCL ("An Evaluation of Approaches for Promoting Relevant Authority and Stakeholder Participation in European Marine Sites in the UK: Final Report to the UK Marine SACs Project", September 2001. E-mail p.j.jones@ucl.ac.uk for a summary of the report).

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- The effectiveness of MPA planning processes in building trust and confidence is strongly related to the specific contexts in which they are carried out. The local characteristics of sites are therefore important, including social and economic activities (both past and present), political culture and existing policy networks, and the physical features and landscape of the area.

- In sites where there are fewer potential stakeholders (i.e., rural areas), there is often a higher expectation and need for participation by stakeholders. In urban sites where there are more potential stakeholders, there is often a lower expectation and need for participation by stakeholders. This should be taken into account when considering the appropriateness of participation techniques

- It is beneficial if the eventual management structure for the MPA is discussed openly at the outset of the participation of stakeholders. The appropriateness of a two-tier management structure (with government authorities wielding supervisory power) or a flat structure (with authorities and stakeholders holding relatively equal power) may depend on the existing level of trust and confidence between the groups, as well as stakeholders' expectation of participation.

- Where existing trust and confidence among authorities and stakeholders has been generated through a previous resource-management initiative, this is more likely to be maintained and enhanced if the MPA is integrated with the previous initiative through adoption/adaptation of the management structure and approach. Where a previous resource-management initiative has been unsuccessful in generating trust and confidence, the underlying causes for this should be assessed and addressed.

- The skills and competencies of project officers should match the social and political culture of sites. At a site with close-knit human communities -- as is the case for many rural areas -- interpersonal skills and local knowledge may be particularly important. In contrast, on a complex urban site, political and scientific expertise may be more important. Project officers with appropriate experience of the local political culture should be employed where possible, particularly for sites that are likely to be politically sensitive or contentious.

Building stakeholder participation

- Involving stakeholders in the initial planning process for an MPA demonstrates confidence in the expertise and knowledge of stakeholders, and builds trust in the commitment to share power and responsibility. Continuing this involvement throughout the management of the MPA, in turn, allows further time to build and strengthen social relations and networks.

- Asking participating stakeholders to suggest other stakeholders who should be involved helps to increase stakeholder representation.

- Restricting the input of stakeholders to discussion, advice, consultation and information provision -- with little or no role in decisionmaking -- can lead to apathy, a lack of willingness to cooperate with the management scheme, protests, and/or defiance of resulting plans and management.

- Assigning stakeholders specific, tangible responsibilities related to planning can develop trust and confidence and provide for constructive stakeholder participation. (At the same time, assigning authorities specific, tangible responsibilities also helps to generate partnership.)

- Project officers need to be aware of existing, perhaps latent, conflicts among stakeholders and government authorities into which the MPA may be drawn.

- Project officers should avoid making draft documents look too glossy and finalized; such appearances can give stakeholders the impression that it is a fait accompli.

- There is a need to achieve a balance between meeting deadlines and keeping the MPA planning process moving forward. It is important not to push the process too quickly, as this may alienate some stakeholders or authorities.

- In the long term, it is critical that initiatives arising from the MPA planning process are seen to be happening on the ground in order to maintain the participation and commitment of authorities and stakeholders.

For more information

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