

MPA Perspective: Basis of MPA Success Lies in the Objectives

Editor's note: The author of the following perspective piece, Nancy Dahl-Tacconi, is currently on leave from the Marine Group of Environment Australia. She is conducting research for her Ph.D. on incorporating participatory processes and scientific methods in the measurement of MPA management effectiveness. In this piece, she draws on her own observations and experience in the MPA field, both in Australia and Indonesia.

By Nancy Dahl-Tacconi

Popular themes in recent MPA literature have been the importance of stakeholder participation and transparent performance-assessment processes. To overcome obstacles toward these ends - such as the high cost of maintaining open communication with stakeholders; overuse of vague or misleading terminology; and gaps in understanding amongst stakeholders - it is necessary to clarify the issues under discussion.

To discuss issues and compare experiences meaningfully, we must examine the site-specific objectives for which each MPA is declared and managed. Objectives not only clarify the type, or IUCN category, of an MPA, but also provide bases for transparent management processes and assessment of management effectiveness.

Without quality objectives, an MPA's potential for success is blocked. The worst situation is for there to be no objectives at all: no guidance for decision-making processes, no grip for stakeholder participation and no foundation for assessment. Other troubles stem from objectives that are too vague, or too few and restrictive. Poor choice of language in wording objectives can also cause persistent obstacles, for management and assessment. All of these problems can be abated if objectives are designed with care.

Regardless of how a set of quality objectives is organized, it must exhibit the following characteristics.

Appropriate

- An objective is appropriate if it is relevant to the area, to the overall management vision for that area, and to the stakeholders affected by that management.
- These objectives are catered to the size and shape of the MPA, type of conservation values, nature of threats to those values, amount of available information, and extent of resources available. This is where blanket views on no-take areas and standardized classes of objectives or indicators become especially problematic because they can distract a management agency from focusing on relevant circumstances.
- Few objectives are appropriate for all MPAs, regardless of their general popularity. For example, the objective "to provide a reference area for scientific monitoring of fishing impacts" may be an appropriate objective for a large, well-enforced MPA adjacent to a well-monitored fishery. It may not, however, be appropriate for a small community-based MPA with limited funds, located adjacent to a poorly managed fishery.

Strategic

- An objective is strategic if its achievement considerably reduces the amount of work necessary to achieve other, future objectives.
- Strategic objectives distinguish a site that is designed to play a part in a larger society (i.e., its protection has long-term social benefits as well as natural benefits) from one that has limited potential (e.g., no educational value or no part in encouraging social development or partnerships).
- Some examples of strategic objectives are: "to improve community awareness of ..."; "to establish partnerships for more integrated management"; and "to facilitate ecological research and innovative approaches to rapid-assessment

techniques".

Timely

- Timely objectives account for and/or take advantage of current trends and situations. They are opportune in that they deal with contemporary environmental, social and economic tendencies.
- Avoiding bad timing is just as important as taking advantage of good timing. This requires that managers be in touch with current news and events related to activities in and around an MPA. The programs and promotions of NGOs, fisheries managers, schools, local festivals, and other management bodies are important things of which to be aware while designing objectives and implementing management decisions.

Reasonable

- Reasonable objectives are achievable in the context of an MPA's specific management challenges. Achieving these objectives is likely because they have been designed with realistic limitations in mind. Such limitations may be the size or location of the MPA, legislation, political agendas, stakeholder conflicts, available technology, or financial resources.
- A solution to dealing with unreasonable objectives is to divide a large task into smaller, immediately achievable steps that can form a stairway of gradual change and success over time.

Measurable

Disputes about the impact and value of MPAs hinge on this criterion. If objectives are not measurable, it cannot be established that they are being achieved or that the MPA is justified.

Measurability is also essential for incorporating scientific support into adaptive management. Objectives must be constructed to avoid problems regarding methodology, analysis and presentation. In many cases, this is a simple issue of wording. In other circumstances, there may be more fundamental problems. For example, the objective "to rehabilitate damaged habitats" is not measurable, and rewording will not solve the problem. Even if "rehabilitate" is defined, there may be too many technological and theoretical obstacles in collecting the data to demonstrate whether it has been achieved. These kinds of objectives need careful reconsideration with some scientific input.

For more information

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