

# MPA Perspective: Dangerous Targets and Inflexible Stances Threaten Marine Conservation Efforts

**Editor's note:** Tundi Agardy, author of the following perspective piece, is the executive director of Sound Seas, a US-based, independent policy group. Agardy excerpted this piece from a paper she co-wrote with several MPA scientists and practitioners, forthcoming in the journal *Aquatic Conservation: Freshwater and Marine Ecosystems* ("Dangerous Targets? Unresolved Issues and Ideological Clashes Around Marine Protected Areas". T. Agardy, P. Bridgewater, M.P. Crosby, J. Day, P.K. Dayton, R. Kenchington, D. Laffoley, P. McConney, P.A. Murray, J.E. Parks, and L. Peau).

By Tundi Agardy

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are fast becoming mainstream tools for conserving biodiversity in all the world's coastal areas. Yet with the welcome rise in MPA interest has come discord, as differing interpretations of what MPAs are and divergent approaches to their use have led to fractures in the once united front for MPA use in marine conservation. This article poses two questions: 1) do only no-take reserves confer legitimacy as MPAs?, and 2) should one spatial target for closures be used for all MPAs? I hope that discussion of these and other questions will help strengthen the use of the MPA tool and ultimately serve to hasten global marine conservation.

## Do Only No-Take Reserves Confer Legitimacy as MPAs?

MPA advocates have long clamored for a single, broadly accepted definition of what constitutes an MPA. In fact the array of goals, and their order of priority, varies widely - so much so that every MPA is essentially unique. MPA planners can follow a standardized methodology to design and implement MPAs, but they should not cling to the idea that a single model will fit all circumstances. Instead, planners must be sure that the final design reflects clearly defined and site-specific objectives.

There are those who argue that only no-take reserves can confer conservation benefits, and those who argue that MPA benefits go well beyond what no-take areas can possibly confer. The problem that this difference of opinion creates is twofold: first, rather than clarifying the scientific validity of MPA benefits, it creates confusion for those searching to find the appropriate tool to fit their needs; and second, it dismisses the very valid other sorts of benefits that MPAs provide. Such benefits include resolving user conflicts, strengthening local and regional economies, empowering local communities, and providing small-scale examples of integrated management.

Perhaps the most important problem with the strong push to establish exclusively no-take MPAs has to do with the perception that only MPAs that fence the ocean to keep people out are worthwhile. Experience shows that this dangerously undermines the ability of managers to implement MPAs successfully. In fact, the best examples of MPAs are those that have drawn fishers and other users into the planning process, creating strong advocates for MPAs among the groups most affected by the prospective restrictions. And most successful multiple-use MPAs include no-take components, making the dichotomy between "hard" no-take and "soft" multiple-use MPAs a false one.

## Should One Spatial Target for Closures be Used for All MPAs?

The push to create scientific consensus statements and publish theoretical papers on MPAs is a natural response to the proliferation of seemingly meaningless MPA designations. This is especially true regarding efforts to identify a single target to describe the minimum amount of area set aside as no-take.

The 20% figure has now become dogma. The origin of this figure is debated, yet it was certainly extrapolated from very localized studies of particular fisheries within particular habitats - not from representative community ecology from a wide range of habitat types. For a small subset of fisheries in a particular biome, the figure may indeed be valid. However, it is most

certainly not a magic number for many biomes that face serious degradation from inadequately controlled uses of the marine and coastal environment. The one-size-fits-all approach cannot be expected to work in all environments to combat all threats. And such failures have repercussions: a very real danger exists if MPAs do not meet expectations, for decision-makers and the public may well eventually abandon them altogether.

Another problem with simplistic targets is that they provide absolutely no guidance on which areas should be protected, from what, or how to achieve the desired outcome. In the end, the tendency will always be to establish no-take areas in the remotest, least-used areas - where strict restrictions can be imposed with minimal resistance. These, unfortunately, are the areas where MPAs are least needed. This leads to another dangerous tendency that adherence to strict minimum targets will present: creating a false sense of security that marine issues are being dealt with adequately.

## **Inadvertent Consequences and the Danger of Derailing Conservation**

All of us working in marine conservation welcome the newfound interest in MPAs. Yet inflexibility and rigid dogma threaten the progress made to date. Narrow interpretations of what constitutes an MPA; objective-setting that is done by a single interest group (often scientists) as opposed to the broadest possible array of stakeholders; adherence to scientifically questionable targets; and the disingenuous labeling of scientific opinion as truth are all extremely dangerous tactics that will not serve defenders of MPAs or marine conservation well in the end.

Science can and should be harnessed to guide MPA planning, yet it should not drive the process unilaterally, especially when it leads to myopia and inflexibility. We must recognize the limits of science - and we must always be honest with ourselves and with the public about the existence of those limits. Anything less than honesty threatens the integrity of all of us working in marine conservation, defeating us, coastal peoples, and oceans themselves.

### **For more information**

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