

MPA Perspective: Ways to Ensure Marine Reserves Get a Fair Test

Note from the editor: Brock Bernstein, author of the perspective piece below, is president of the National Fisheries Conservation Center (NFCC). The NFCC is a US-based NGO dedicated to developing "win-win" fisheries-management approaches that benefit natural resources and the human communities that depend on them. The piece below originally appeared in the February 2002 issue of *Pacific Fishing* magazine, a US-based trade publication covering the Pacific commercial fishing industry (<http://www.pfmag.com>).

By Brock Bernstein, National Fisheries Conservation Center

I know a fisherman who doesn't think marine reserves are needed. He's skeptical of their ability to improve fishery yields and says he just wishes they'd go away. In spite of that, he's willing to contribute his knowledge to help improve their design and lessen their immediate impacts on fishermen. But like many others who share both his point of view and his deep knowledge of the ocean, he has been frustrated by a welter of problems that leave fishermen feeling marginalized and even targeted as the movement toward marine reserves gains momentum.

Marine reserves are being proposed, at the local, state, and federal level, as the solution to a variety of problems facing fisheries management and resource conservation. Proponents often describe marine reserves as a cure for overfishing, overuse, and environmental change. To be sure, there is strong evidence that marine reserves lead to greater numbers, larger size, and higher diversity of fish populations in completely protected areas, particularly where controls on fishing outside the reserve are weak or nonexistent. And there is little doubt that a good way to protect biodiversity is to fence an area off and protect it from all exploitation, as is done with national parks.

However - and this is a very large "however" - there are serious practical, scientific, and administrative issues to be faced. These must be dealt with fairly and thoroughly if reserves are to have any chance of achieving their intended benefits for all parties - fishermen included - without creating unnecessary economic hardship for fishermen and the coastal communities that depend on them.

1. INCLUDE FISHERMEN FROM THE START. The agencies managing the planning processes must streamline and coordinate their efforts. There are unfortunately too many examples of overlapping and uncoordinated efforts that put fishermen in the untenable position of either attending numerous meetings - and losing substantial amounts of income - or going fishing and missing the chance to protect their interests. These agencies must also think hard about how to provide fishermen and other interested parties with opportunities to get usefully engaged in these processes early and often. Decades of experience with siting parks, conservation areas, and large facilities such as power plants show that success is impossible without the full participation of affected groups from the very beginning of the planning process.

2. LEAVE TIME TO GET A THOROUGH "PEOPLE PICTURE". Planning timelines must leave room for adequate socioeconomic studies, and these must be fully funded. Existing data are usually not detailed enough to be used in evaluating tradeoffs among different proposals, and it is unrealistic to ask fishermen and other affected groups to buy into additional restrictions on their activities without reliable estimates of costs and benefits. In addition, the data needed for socioeconomic studies can often be obtained only with the willing cooperation of the fishing industry, and such cooperative relationships take time to build.

3. FISHERIES SCIENTISTS/MANAGERS AND RESERVES SCIENTISTS NEED TO TALK. Reserves, even those designed strictly for conservation purposes, do affect fishing, and this impact needs to be accounted for in fisheries management plans. Reserves developed for the purpose of enhancing fisheries are in fact another form of effort control. Questions about how this should be traded off against more traditional forms of effort control have not yet been tackled. This will take repeated and purposeful discussions between the two groups of scientists.

4. MEASURE WHAT WORKS, FIX WHAT DOESN'T. Adaptive management principles must be embedded in reserve design and management. This means a commitment to stating specific goals, objectives, and benchmarks; implementing monitoring and evaluation plans to measure progress toward them; and changing reserve designs if progress is not occurring as expected.

5. SUPPORT FISHERMEN'S PARTICIPATION. Fishermen need support to organize their involvement in discussions about whether and where reserves should be implemented. All fishermen can't be at every meeting and negotiating session. They need representatives they can trust, who are knowledgeable, and who can hold their own in discussion and argument with scientists, conservation advocates, and managers. These representatives, especially if they are active fishermen, need financial support to enable them to attend meetings, which often means losing income. They also need the logistical and financial support to go back to their constituencies and explain the progress of discussions, get feedback on proposed solutions, and develop agreements.

Many fishermen see reserves as the pet project of conservation groups and would just as soon see them disappear. That's not going to happen. There's enough evidence and momentum behind the reserve idea to ensure that it will get a serious trial, and there are potential benefits for fishermen to be had. For reserves to get a fair test, and for this to happen in a way that reduces the short-term pain for fishermen and maximizes the possibility of medium- to long-term benefits, the five issues above need to be addressed head-on. Fishermen can do everyone involved a good turn by focusing their advocacy efforts, both inside and outside the fishing community, on seeing that they are addressed honestly and thoroughly.

For more information

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