

MPA Perspective: Why and How MPA Planners Should Obtain Fishermen's Knowledge

Editor's Note: Bruce Burrows, author of the following perspective piece, has worked as a commercial fisherman on the Pacific Coast of Canada for 20 years. Burrows now serves as fisheries outreach coordinator for the Living Oceans Society, a Canadian NGO, raising the awareness of fishermen on the subject of MPAs. In the following piece, he offers tips to NGOs and other MPA planners on why and how they should work with commercial fishermen. Some of his points echo comments made by Bob Johannes (see [Johannes](#), this issue) in discussing the knowledge of indigenous fishermen. [Burrows's piece is based on a presentation he made at the "MPA Power Tools Conference", White Rock, British Columbia, Canada, October 19-21, 2001.]

By Bruce Burrows

Why should MPA planners talk to fishermen?

- The act of gathering fishermen's knowledge results in the formation of a relationship -- hopefully a good one based on trust. This will help to achieve the buy-in necessary for establishment and enforcement. Buy-in is both a moral and pragmatic necessity. In a true democratic system, you can't impose measures on various groups without some effort to achieve agreement. And experience shows that if fishermen don't agree with conservation measures, such as MPAs, those measures will fail.
- Fishermen's knowledge fills data gaps -- i.e., cod spawning areas, coral reefs, sponge reefs. Their information is, geographically, usually of a much finer scale than government info. And collectively it's much more complete for a given commercial species than anything government or academia can produce because fishermen spend so much more time on the water
- If you identify and avoid high-use areas, you can avoid unnecessary battles. There's no sense going to war to protect a highly fished mud bank if there's another mud bank that isn't highly fished. That doesn't mean we have to avoid all battles, just unnecessary ones.
- If you can achieve a consensus among user groups, you can use that to lever governments. In the developed world, most MPAs have been pushed by citizen groups with fishermen following along behind -- i.e., Great Barrier Reef and the dive-oriented sites in BC. But in the Third World, many no-take areas have been established at the behest of local fishermen, often led by an NGO. This could be because NGOs have developed a relationship with local people through their economic development work.

How should MPA planners talk to fishermen?

- Don't use the term "fishers".
- Explain what you're trying to do and what the benefits are for fishermen. Present the evidence for fisheries benefits resulting from MPAs.
- Be aware that "overfishing" is not the fault of fishermen but of managers, at least in a managed fishery.
- It can be very helpful if you establish a relationship based on issues other than MPAs. For example, if local fishermen are fighting to clean up pulp mill emissions and you can assist in that fight, it will give you some credibility when you want to talk about MPAs.

- Be aware of history and the mistrust fishermen have for outside bodies, government or NGOs. Urge fishermen to take control of the process.
- Never, ever sell people out. If you're going to use fishermen or First Nations [Canadian term for aboriginal people] as poster children in some environmental fight, you can't then paint them as villains every time stocks become depleted.
- Be respectful. If a fisherman says cod spawn in a certain area, don't question that information just because it doesn't agree with what some government agency says. Chances are, he's right.
- Don't use academic or bureaucratic language, but don't patronize either. It is just good practice to avoid the use of jargon and to use the local names for fish.
- Be honest. If there's potential for information to result in a negative impact on fishermen, even short-term, be upfront about it. Fishermen are used to closures and restrictions. They will accept them if they can see a potential benefit.
- Be specific about what you mean by an "MPA". You have to be clear about this because it has huge ramifications for fishermen. We use the Living Oceans Society definition, which is a core no-take area overlaid with strict habitat protection mechanisms and surrounded by a buffer area that extends the habitat protection standards.
- Try to limit "respondent burden". Don't ask everybody for everything. People have areas of expertise. Ask a few key questions and be ready for extra comments -- e.g., I ask about spawning areas and former hotspots. That starts the conversation and I get all sorts of other info. But presenting every fisherman with a standardized, extensive list of questions can be off-putting and a waste of time if the questions are outside his area of expertise.
- Recognize that there are different user groups and that they have different perspectives and concerns. For example, salmon fishermen have less of a stake in MPAs than rockfish guys. Bottom draggers may be less sympathetic because they are so often portrayed as the villains. Small boat owner/operators are often "greener" because they fish close to home and can't always sail away from their excesses.

Conclusion: I don't pretend these are hard and fast rules, or the only way to approach local information gathering, but they reflect my experience. I'd be interested in hearing comments about other people's experience and methodology.

For more information

Bruce Burrows, Living Oceans Society, Box 166, Sointula, BC V0N 3E0. Tel: +1 250 973 6580; E-mail: bburrows@livingoceans.org.

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