

MPAs and Tourism: Stakeholders Work to Build a Productive Relationship

Managing the relationship between tourism and marine protected areas requires a balancing act on the part of MPA practitioners. The unique ecological features found in MPAs often make them popular tourist attractions for scuba diving, sightseeing, or other activities, and these can generate revenue for the MPA and the local community. But tourists, if not managed carefully, can quickly degrade the very resources they have come to see.

This month, MPA News examines how some stakeholders in the global MPA community -- divers, researchers, recreational fishers, and environmentalists -- are working to influence the way that MPA practitioners balance tourism and conservation.

Teaching divers to be conservationists

Researchers have documented the negative impacts that scuba divers can have on the underwater environment, including through disruption of habitat and fish populations. However, Angelo Mojetta believes that if scuba divers are adequately trained on how to minimize those impacts, there is no reason to restrict them from an MPA.

A marine biologist on the science and environment committee of ASSOSUB (the Italian diving equipment marketing association), Mojetta would like to see an easing of diving restrictions that exist in many Italian MPAs. "The increasing number of marine protected areas in Italy -- which represents a great opportunity for our seas -- is creating some difficulties for divers," he said.

Both MPAs and diving are relatively new to his country, he said. When Italy officially designated its first MPA in 1986, diving was an uncommon pastime for Italians. Now, said Mojetta, the country has 15 federal marine reserves and more than 300,000 registered divers.

All Italian federal marine reserves feature some restrictions on diving. Under federal law, the reserves are required to be zoned, with all recreational diving forbidden in the most highly protected zones. Each reserve, however, is free to set its own regulations with regard to diving permits. Some authorities require dive centers to pay a fee, and restrict market entry to those dive centers that existed at the time of the reserve's designation. In others, diving is permitted for groups of no more than six to eight divers with a guide, with reservations required: all diver names, the site, and the time of diving must be communicated in advance.

Mojetta views these restrictions as too severe. Although many divers are open to the idea of daily or annual limits on the number of divers, he says, the reserve authorities should devote more attention to educating divers on how to be better conservationists. Currently, that responsibility has been left to diving schools, aquaria, and diving magazines. Mojetta himself teaches an annual, two-month course on marine biology at the Aquarium of Milan; the course regularly has more than 100 students, many of whom are divers, he said.

"Communication is a valuable process for transmitting not only knowledge of, but sensibility toward, the aquatic environment," said Mojetta. "The idea should be to change divers from being mere consumers of the sea to real living resources of the aquatic environment, modifying their interests and involving them in sustainable protection."

Fish size and dive tourism

Murray Rudd also sees the value that can come from linking MPAs and dive tourism. An economist and former director of the Center for Marine Resource Studies in the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), Rudd has researched the potential economic value of increased grouper size and abundance to the dive tourism industry in TCI. His research suggests that such value may have a large impact on the economic viability of no-take reserves in the islands.

In a paper presented at the July 2000 International Conference on the Economics of Marine Protected Areas in Vancouver, British Columbia (Canada), Rudd and his co-investigators hypothesized that viewing healthy coral reefs and vibrant fish

communities added value to the experience of visiting tourists. The team set out to assess the added value through surveys of divers and recent visitors to TCI. Their simulation results showed that the economic value that respondents held for increased grouper abundance and size was potentially large. In the case of abundance, 47% of respondents indicated they would be willing to pay an extra US \$10 or more for a trip that featured 12 grouper per dive than for a trip featuring one grouper. This increase in abundance would lead to a 13% increase in net dive expenditures. Similarly, 20% of respondents were willing to pay an extra US \$10 or more for a trip with large grouper (13.6-kg) than for a trip with small grouper (2.3-kg), resulting in a 5.6% increase in net dive expenditures.

Rudd points out that efforts to protect grouper, such as through establishment of finfish no-take zones around TCI, would undoubtedly result in loss of revenue for artisanal fishers. The TCI tourism industry is growing at an annual rate of 10%, with demand for grouper and other local finfish at tourist restaurants increasing apace. Although spiny lobster and conch have been the traditional target species in TCI, said Rudd, "It's clear that some fishers are starting to more actively target grouper and other reef fish."

Nonetheless, any negative effect on the fishery could be offset by a US \$5 increase in the price of a dive, says Rudd, which, according to his team's calculations, could lead to revenue of up to US \$750,000. If the \$5 charge were instituted as a user fee, some of the revenue could be redirected to fishers as compensation for lost catches. The implication, said Rudd, is that "there is potential to implement a system of user fees that could be used to help fund conservation efforts."

He says the two conservation-oriented bodies in the TCI government -- the Department of Environment and Coastal Resources (DECR) and the Coastal Resources Management Project (CRMP), essentially an evolving national parks service -- have both responded favorably to the study results. However, implementation of a user fee remains unlikely in the near future. The TCI government instituted a 1% sales tax on restaurant meals and accommodations in 1999 to fund CRMP operations, and has expressed reluctance to institute new fees for the time being, said Rudd.

In addition, there would likely be opposition to a user fee from the dive industry. "The consensus within the dive industry seems to be that the government has been unable to efficiently use revenue and in-kind labor to protect existing parks effectively," said Rudd. "Until the new national park service gets fully organized and operating smoothly, the dive industry will probably remain skeptical that user fees would be used to enhance dive site quality."

The role of recreational fishing

In the US, recreational fishing is big business. According to one industry estimate, recreational fishing adds more than US \$100 billion to the US economy yearly. The recreational fishing community has become increasingly organized, forming associations with tens of thousands of members or more, and has begun lobbying in earnest on an array of state and national regulatory issues. One of the key issues is MPAs.

"We don't oppose marine protected areas," said Pat Murray, communications director for the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA), a 75,000-member recreational fishery association. "What we oppose is the arbitrary exclusion of anglers in cases where there's no scientific reason to support those restrictions."

CCA's position is that it will fight to protect access for recreational fishers to all public fishing areas unless:

- There is a clear indication that recreational fishers are the cause of the conservation problem, and that less severe conservation measures (such as gear or size restrictions) will not adequately address the problem.
- The closed-area regulation includes specific, measurable criteria to determine the conservation benefit of the closed area and provides a timetable for periodic review of the continued need for the closed area.
- The closed area is no larger than that which is supported by the best available science.
- Provision is made to reopen the closed area to recreational fishing whenever the targeted conservation problem no longer exists.

CCA has filed suit against the US National Fisheries Service to challenge a regulation to close two areas of the Gulf of Mexico for the protection of gag grouper, which spawn at those areas. Besides banning fishing for grouper, which live near the sea bottom, the no-take zones would ban fishing for non-threatened species (including mackerel, wahoo and other pelagics) that live higher in the water column. Murray said discussions are ongoing to reach a settlement in the suit.

CCA and the American Sportfishing Association, another recreational fishing organization, backed a bill in the last session of the US Congress that would amend the nation's fisheries law to include most of CCA's positions on MPAs. As drafted, the bill could also influence the way fisheries inside national marine sanctuaries are managed. Called the "Freedom to Fish Act", the bill did not make it to a vote of the full Congress; its congressional sponsors are expected to reintroduce it in the current session, however.

Murray says recreational fishers get caught in the crossfire between fisheries managers and commercial fishers. The latter, he says, cause much more negative environmental impacts than do recreational fishers. "Regulators tend to act with a broad brush and they group all fishermen together, despite the many differences in gear and impacts between commercial and

recreational groups," said Murray. "We don't want recreational fishermen to be excluded just because it's easy to do."

Establishing principles for tourism

Tourism in the Arctic has grown significantly in recent years, with sightseers, recreational fishers, hikers, and others taking advantage of an expanding regional tourism infrastructure. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) views this development as an opportunity to increase awareness of Arctic environmental issues and provide a sustainable income source for northern communities.

Recognizing the positive potential for tourism and the potentially negative impacts if tourism were left unmanaged, the WWF Arctic Programme generated a set of principles and codes of conduct for Arctic tourism in 1997. To develop the set of rules, the Norway-based Programme facilitated a multistakeholder process with the involvement of local communities, governments, the tourism industry, and researchers.

The set includes 10 principles for governing the overall development of tourism in the region, including the sustainable use of natural resources and the economic benefit of Arctic communities from tourism. The codes of conduct -- including a code for tour operators and one for tourists -- detail how the principles can be applied. The entire set of rules is available on the web at <http://www.grida.no/wwfap/library/tourism.html>.

Miriam Geitz, assistant project coordinator for the WWF Arctic Programme's Linking Tourism and Conservation Initiative, said that although the principles and codes were designed to fit the Arctic environment, their potential application could be broader. "It would be no problem to adapt these guidelines to other pristine regions of the world -- or to tourism destinations in general," said Geitz.

The WWF Arctic Programme has encouraged the application of its rule set through several pilot projects, in which private tour operators have incorporated the rules in their daily operations and assessed their applicability. In addition, the Programme has teamed with the (US) state of Alaska and the Alaska Wilderness and Recreation Association to develop a circumpolar, voluntary accreditation program for tourism businesses, called LINKS. Businesses that can demonstrate compliance with the rule set will be awarded a special label and receive marketing and technical support for their operations. Geitz said a website for the LINKS program would be posted soon.

Although much of the WWF Arctic Programme's work linking tourism and conservation has not been specifically MPA-based, the Programme has applied its set of principles to discussions on the future of the Svalbard archipelago in the Norwegian high Arctic. In June 2001, the Norwegian Parliament will consider passage of a special environmental law for Svalbard to provide additional management of human activities on the archipelago. The government has also proposed the creation of nine new terrestrial protected areas in the region. WWF would like to see the archipelago, outside of current settlements, managed as one integrated system of protected areas.

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