

# Special Focus on Consensus-Based Planning: When Are Consensus Processes Appropriate for MPA Management?

The use of consensus-based decision-making to manage MPAs has grown in popularity over the last several years. With the goal of achieving increased "buy-in" from community stakeholders, MPA planners and managers are increasingly sharing some of their traditional decision-making powers and responsibilities with the community at large.

However, consensus processes are still a relatively new tool in MPA management. As with any new tool, the challenge now facing managers is to improve the tools' effectiveness, and to recognize when it is most useful. Experts on consensus-based decision-making caution that such processes may not always be appropriate for MPA management, and that planners and managers need to recognize when it is best to use them.

## Criteria for Consensus

Clare Ryan, a former policy analyst with the US Environmental Protection Agency and now a professor of natural resource policy at the University of Washington (USA), cautions managers against jumping into consensus processes.

"[Managers] should first ask whether the issue is important enough for their organizations to spend the time and resources necessary for the process," she said. As evident from any number of recent examples, including the Tortugas 2000 process in which a multistakeholder group spent a year deciding on a proposed no-harvest area in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (MPA News 1[1]), consensus processes can be a time-consuming endeavor. In addition, said Ryan, in the interest of ensuring good faith, there must be a public commitment from all sides to finding a joint resolution, and this commitment must come prior to entering the consensus process.

The field of environmental conflict resolution has developed several criteria useful to MPA managers in deciding whether or not to enter a consensus process. Christopher W. Moore suggested in his 1996 book "The Mediation Process" (paraphrased below) that a conflict was "ripe" for negotiation when the involved parties were:

- Reliant on the cooperation of one another;
- Able to influence one another, positively or negatively;
- Pressured by deadlines;
- Aware that alternatives to a negotiated settlement might not appear as viable as a joint decision;
- Able to identify and involve the primary parties in the problem-solving process;
- Able to agree on the issues in the dispute;
- In a situation in which their interests were not entirely incompatible; and
- Influenced by external constraints, such as the unpredictability of a judicial decision.

## Need for Managerial Foresight

Julia Gardner of Dovetail Consulting (British Columbia, Canada) has mediated several consensus processes on natural resource issues, including MPAs, and said that collaborative decision-making "has become the norm" for resource planning in British Columbia. Gardner expressed concern with the fact that when used inappropriately, consensus processes can water down conservation objectives.

The strength of consensus processes, she said, comes in securing community buy-in to a management plan. Since buy-in is often most difficult to achieve in the initial step of creating a protected area -- when traditional uses of the area are at greatest

risk of being affected by the MPA -- this step can benefit the most from consensus. "Ethically, a greater range of stakeholders have a right to be involved at this stage," she said. Nonetheless, she noted, there exists somewhat of a paradox: Consensus processes at this early stage may also whittle down protection goals, as clear boundaries for allowed activities may not yet have been adopted.

"It is disconcerting that there's such a need for consensus because of this need for community buy-in," said Gardner. "You can run the risk of having no protection at all."

She said that consensus planning was often prompted by a conflict caused by a proposal for a new extractive resource use in a protected area. "By entering into a [community] consensus process on this proposal, you -- the resource manager -- put the extractor on an equal footing with resource protectors," she said. "Some projects that may be essentially antithetical to the conservation objective are given a foothold." In initiating this consensus process, the resource manager is treating all interests as legitimate stakeholders, even those who might seek to degrade what the MPA was designed to protect.

The manager's best defense against this is planning, said Gardner. "Managers need foresight to clarify the boundaries of allowed and forbidden activities prior to an extractor's approach," she said. Proactive, rather than reactive, management is the key to long-term protection.

## **"Well Worth the Effort"**

The Florida Keys example of this past year, in which managers viewed community buy-in as essential to their creation of a no-take "ecological reserve" in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS), indicates the potential that consensus processes hold for protecting marine areas. Joanne Delaney, research interpreter for FKNMS, said that the size, scope, and remoteness of the proposed reserve made its success dependent on broad-based public understanding and support.

"The facilitated, consensus-building process in developing criteria and proposed boundaries for the reserve [was] well worth the time and effort required," wrote Delaney in a synopsis of the process. She said the process assured that the final product would be one that the Florida Keys community could support for years to come.

For readings on when situations are ripe for negotiation -- as well as when the use of a third party might be appropriate -- see Christopher W. Moore's "The Mediation Process" (1996, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, California), or Gerald Cormick's classic article "The Theory and Practice of Environmental Mediation," published in 1980 in "The Environmental Professional" (Vol. 2, pp. 24-33).

### **For more information:**

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