

Stretching Your MPA Budget: How to Do More with Less Funding

When MPA practitioners face the challenge of meeting their conservation goals with a budget that is less than optimal, there are two options available to them: seek more funding from other sources, and find ways to minimize costs. Because the "seek more funding" option can entail significant work without guaranteed returns, many practitioners have become adept at finding ways to stretch the limited funding they have. In the tightly budgeted world of MPA planning and management, frugality is a necessary virtue.

This month, MPA News interviewed two managers - one from the US, one from Zanzibar - about the challenge of doing more with less, and how to leverage available resources to manage an MPA effectively.

A diversity of partnerships

Susan White is the national coordinator of marine programs for the US National Wildlife Refuge System, a century-old program overseeing hundreds of sites across the US and its territories. Despite the program's longevity and its formative role in national development of marine resource management, its financial history has been one of relatively minimal budgets.

"To deal with this, the program has developed a diversity of partnerships with other entities to leverage the refuge system's resources," said White. "Although the idea of partnering is the idea du jour in protected area management, the refuge system has been doing it for 100 years." Managers of many refuges have teamed up with state-level agencies for wildlife management and law enforcement. At other refuges, NGOs help with management and conduct research. Other federal agencies, such as the US Department of Defense, US Coast Guard, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) also provide key assistance at refuges that share property or operations.

"When you don't have a lot of funding, you need to be innovative in capitalizing on what you have," said White. In several cases, she said, the refuge system has acquired coastlines that are degraded, then identified these areas to regulators as being in need of restoration. This allows private land developers - faced with legally mandated mitigation of coastal impacts they have generated elsewhere - to fund restoration of the refuge's land at minimal cost to the refuge system. Managers have also worked with adjacent landowners, such as by obtaining grant funding to help fence out livestock on private land from a waterway that flows downstream to a refuge, thereby improving water quality.

In a prior job from 1989-1994, White was manager of the Saba Marine Park in the Netherlands Antilles, where partnerships and networking played just as important a role. While the park initially benefited from Dutch government funding, it became self-financing early on (through visitor fees, souvenir sales, and donations) and also took advantage of regional coordination opportunities in the Caribbean, such as those offered by the UNEP Regional Seas Programme and the IUCN. In her work on Saba, White helped convene the first meetings of marine park managers in the Netherlands Antilles - an opportunity to share resources and reduce duplication. That networking continued well beyond her departure and has borne fruit in recent years, such as through the sharing of mooring-buoy installation equipment among parks in the archipelago.

Volunteers are a critical component to getting things done on a tight budget, said White. "For every aspect of what an MPA is about - physical labor, education, administration - there is a volunteer who can help with it," she said. The refuge system is striving to get more volunteer coordinators in order to train and nurture volunteers, and ensure that the latter know their efforts are appreciated. Although such training and attention involves an investment on the part of the refuge, that investment is critical and pays dividends, said White. Not only can volunteers perform duties on the MPA site, but they also become ambassadors for the MPA in the community, all while fulfilling their own interests.

Those volunteers with connections to funding organizations can even help to seek financial assistance for the protected area. "You rely on friends to help you seek additional funds," said White. In her days as manager of the Saba Marine Park, she took advantage of every such opportunity. Describing how she went about patching budgetary holes for equipment, research, and other needs, she said, "Almost everyone I talked to, I would tell them of our needs, ask for donations, time, or even supplies. Everyone can be a source of assistance. When someone shows a bit of interest, find out what they like to do and capitalize upon it."

Staying afloat with frugal management

Out of necessity, finding ways to keep overhead costs down has become an art form for Sibylle Riedmiller, project director for Chumbe Island Coral Park Ltd. (CHICOP). CHICOP, a small, not-for-profit company, manages the Chumbe Reef Sanctuary, located 13 km southwest of Zanzibar, Tanzania. The operation aims to create a model of sustainable conservation area management where ecotourism supports conservation and education.

In early 2001, Riedmiller and CHICOP faced a serious financial challenge. Political violence was flaring up in Zanzibar, and foreign officials and media were warning tourists against travel to the area. Tourism - and the revenue it brought to the sanctuary - dropped off immediately. In an interview at the time with MPA News (MPA News 2:8), Riedmiller said the best way to prepare financially for such events was to keep operating expenses to a precautionary minimum: encourage help from volunteers, keep some staff on seasonal schedules, outsource some monitoring to university students, and conduct marketing for the MPA primarily via the Web.

A year later, CHICOP is still going, although the occupancy rate in its lodgings remains relatively low. (Riedmiller attributes this partly to reduced global tourism in general due to worldwide events of the past few months.) "Luckily we are able to stay afloat with very frugal management of the park," she said.

The internet has been very helpful, said Riedmiller. "Once an MPA has a good presence, profile, and ranking on the Web, you will get offers for volunteer work from all around the world - more than you can accommodate," she said. "Plus, information on donors, NGOs, zoos, conservation organizations, etc. is on the internet." She said that relevant newsletters and networks - also on the Web - are effective in finding out about potential funding sources, funding criteria, and application forms. As a case in point, she found out about a funding program for coral reef conservation activities run by the US-based National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (<http://www.nfwf.org>); CHICOP applied, and was approved, for a US \$10,000 grant to support an environmental education program for the sanctuary.

"Another source of very welcome support is our visitors, who are enthusiastic about what they see happening, and who sometimes offer help spontaneously," said Riedmiller. Examples of such assistance include free use of high-quality photos; purchasing and forwarding spare parts from overseas; free, professional-quality advice; and word-of-mouth recommendations of the project to friends.

"In the early years when the internet wasn't yet accessible here - and we weren't very visible there! - friends, or friends of friends, offered volunteer work," said Riedmiller. "Some tourists decided they loved the place and wanted to spend some time here [to help out]. At one point in 1999, when we had an urgent need for temporary island managers, our project manager even searched for suitable candidates among tourists dining and drinking in Zanzibarian restaurants and bars. She found an enthusiastic Canadian couple who were flexible enough to jump on the opportunity and move to Chumbe the next day or so. They ended up spending half a year with us."

Riedmiller said that it is important for practitioners in developing nations to choose technologies and technical equipment that are simple, appropriate, and low-cost to maintain under developing world conditions. "In most cases this means 'outdated' equipment by Western standards, often secondhand, but which is still fully operational and has a lifespan that can be extended by local technicians," she said. Old computers and reconditioned cars can be fixed locally. "In most third World countries, one can find low-cost alternatives to virtually everything in local, informal markets, as well as roadside fitters and 'technicians' who are creative in fixing things that are considered scrap elsewhere."

In contrast, said Riedmiller, the expensive, state-of-the-art equipment too-often favored by donor-supported projects often breaks down quickly in an environment characterized by tropical climates, power fluctuations, unskilled users and lack of specialized spare parts. She cites, as one example, a set of expensive solar batteries her project imported from Europe. The batteries broke down, and now CHICOP buys normal car batteries, obtained locally.

"Very fortunately, as a conservation area, Chumbe is in excellent shape," said Riedmiller. The reef is healthy, and a recent survey of local fishermen indicated strong support for the MPA, despite its no-take restrictions. "The results were even better than we expected," she said.

For more information

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Box: White spoke at Sustaining Seascapes symposium

Susan White, who spoke with MPA News for the adjoining article, gave a presentation on some of the same subject matter at

the *Sustaining Seascapes: The Science and Policy of Marine Resource Management* symposium, hosted in March by the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. More information on the symposium is available online at <http://research.amnh.org/biodiversity/symposia/seascapes/>.

Next month: Advice on seeking more funds

In the May 2002 issue, MPA News will examine where MPA practitioners can go to seek additional funding, with contact information for aid organizations and tips on how to approach them.

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