



## An appeal for a code of conduct for marine conservation

Nathan J. Bennett<sup>a,b,c,\*</sup>, Lydia Teh<sup>d</sup>, Yoshitaka Ota<sup>d</sup>, Patrick Christie<sup>b,e</sup>, Adam Ayers<sup>f</sup>, Jon C. Day<sup>g</sup>, Phil Franks<sup>h</sup>, David Gill<sup>i</sup>, Rebecca L. Gruby<sup>j</sup>, John N. Kittinger<sup>k,x</sup>, J. Zachary Koehn<sup>l</sup>, Nai'a. Lewis<sup>m</sup>, John Parks<sup>n</sup>, Marjo Vierros<sup>o</sup>, Tara S. Whitty<sup>p</sup>, Aulani Wilhelm<sup>k,m</sup>, Kim Wright<sup>q</sup>, Jaime A. Aburto<sup>r</sup>, Elena M. Finkbeiner<sup>c,s</sup>, Carlos F. Gaymer<sup>r</sup>, Hugh Govan<sup>t,y</sup>, Noella Gray<sup>u</sup>, Rebecca M. Jarvis<sup>v,w</sup>, Maery Kaplan-Hallam<sup>a</sup>, Terre Satterfield<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability, University of British Columbia, Canada

<sup>b</sup> School of Marine and Environmental Affairs, University of Washington, USA

<sup>c</sup> Center for Ocean Solutions, Stanford University, USA

<sup>d</sup> Nereus Program and Institute for Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, Canada

<sup>e</sup> Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, USA

<sup>f</sup> Joint Institute for Marine and Atmospheric Research (JIMAR), NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, USA

<sup>g</sup> ARC Centre for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University, Australia

<sup>h</sup> International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), London, UK

<sup>i</sup> Luc Hoffmann Institute, World Wildlife Fund International, Switzerland & National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC), University of Maryland, USA

<sup>j</sup> Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, Colorado State University, USA

<sup>k</sup> Center for Oceans, Conservation International, USA

<sup>l</sup> School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, University of Washington, USA

<sup>m</sup> Big Ocean

<sup>n</sup> Marine Management Solutions, USA

<sup>o</sup> Coastal Policy and Humanities Research, Canada

<sup>p</sup> Center for Marine Biodiversity and Conservation, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California San Diego, USA

<sup>q</sup> Coastal, Marine and Island Environments Program, Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) Consortium, Canada

<sup>r</sup> Millennium Nucleus for Ecology and Sustainable Management of Oceanic Islands (ESMOI), Universidad Católica del Norte, Chile

<sup>s</sup> Hopkins Marine Station, Stanford University, USA

<sup>t</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, Fiji

<sup>u</sup> Department of Geography, University of Guelph, Canada

<sup>v</sup> Institute for Applied Ecology New Zealand, School of Science, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

<sup>w</sup> Sydney Institute of Marine Science, Australia

<sup>x</sup> Center for Biodiversity Outcomes, Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability, Arizona State University, USA

<sup>y</sup> School of Government, Development & International Affairs (SGDIA), University of the South Pacific (USP), Fiji

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### ABSTRACT

Marine conservation actions are promoted to conserve natural values and support human wellbeing. Yet the quality of governance processes and the social consequences of some marine conservation initiatives have been the subject of critique and even human rights complaints. These types of governance and social issues may jeopardize the legitimacy of, support for and long-term effectiveness of marine conservation. Thus, we argue that a clearly articulated and comprehensive set of social standards - a code of conduct - is needed to guide marine conservation. In this paper, we draw on the results of an expert meeting and scoping review to present key principles that might be taken into account in a code of conduct, to propose a draft set of foundational elements for inclusion in a code of conduct, to discuss the benefits and challenges of such a document, and to propose next steps to develop and facilitate the uptake of a broadly applicable code of conduct within the marine conservation community. The objectives of developing such a code of conduct are to promote fair conservation governance and decision-making, socially just conservation actions and outcomes, and accountable conservation practice.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [nathan.bennett@ubc.ca](mailto:nathan.bennett@ubc.ca) (N.J. Bennett), [lydia.teh@oceans.ubc.ca](mailto:lydia.teh@oceans.ubc.ca) (L. Teh), [y.ota@oceans.ubc.ca](mailto:y.ota@oceans.ubc.ca) (Y. Ota), [patrickc@uw.edu](mailto:patrickc@uw.edu) (P. Christie), [alawbnc@gmail.com](mailto:alawbnc@gmail.com) (A. Ayers), [jon.day@my.jcu.edu.au](mailto:jon.day@my.jcu.edu.au) (J.C. Day), [Phil.Franks@iied.org](mailto:Phil.Franks@iied.org) (P. Franks), [dgill@conservation.org](mailto:dgill@conservation.org) (D. Gill), [Rebecca.Gruby@colostate.edu](mailto:Rebecca.Gruby@colostate.edu) (R.L. Gruby), [jkittinger@conservation.org](mailto:jkittinger@conservation.org) (J.N. Kittinger), [zkoehn@uw.edu](mailto:zkoehn@uw.edu) (J.Z. Koehn), [naia@bigoceanmanagers.org](mailto:naia@bigoceanmanagers.org) (N. Lewis), [jeparks5@gmail.com](mailto:jeparks5@gmail.com) (J. Parks), [mvierros@shaw.ca](mailto:mvierros@shaw.ca) (M. Vierros), [tara.whitty@gmail.com](mailto:tara.whitty@gmail.com) (T.S. Whitty), [awilhelm@conservation.org](mailto:awilhelm@conservation.org) (A. Wilhelm), [kim@iccaconsortium.org](mailto:kim@iccaconsortium.org) (K. Wright), [jaburto@ucn.cl](mailto:jaburto@ucn.cl) (J.A. Aburto), [elenamf@stanford.edu](mailto:elenamf@stanford.edu) (E.M. Finkbeiner), [cgaymer@ucn.cl](mailto:cgaymer@ucn.cl) (C.F. Gaymer), [hgovan@gmail.com](mailto:hgovan@gmail.com) (H. Govan), [grayn@uoguelph.ca](mailto:grayn@uoguelph.ca) (N. Gray), [rebecca.jarvis@aut.ac.nz](mailto:rebecca.jarvis@aut.ac.nz) (R.M. Jarvis), [maerykaplan@gmail.com](mailto:maerykaplan@gmail.com) (M. Kaplan-Hallam), [terre.satterfield@ires.ubc.ca](mailto:terre.satterfield@ires.ubc.ca) (T. Satterfield).

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tioners and organizations. The uptake and implementation of a code of conduct would enable marine conservation to be both socially acceptable and ecologically effective, thereby contributing to a truly sustainable ocean.

## 1. Marine conservation: In need of a social standard

Action is needed to conserve and manage the marine environment in order to maintain healthy ecosystems and human wellbeing. This is particularly true in a world with mounting anthropogenic threats, including overfishing, pollution, coastal population growth, biodiversity loss, habitat destruction and climate change [1–3]. The international community has responded by pushing for increased marine conservation and management. Notable examples include the Convention on Biological Diversity (Aichi Target 11) and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 14) [4,5]. Both platforms articulate targets of 10% protection of marine and coastal areas in marine protected areas (MPAs) by 2020. In a motion approved at the recent 2016 World Conservation Congress in Honolulu, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is advocating for an even more ambitious goal of 30% coverage in MPAs (See: <https://portals.iucn.org/congress/motion/053>). Some conservation organizations are even promoting a goal of 50% through the Nature Needs Half movement [6,7]. Indeed, marine conservation targets, supported by regional initiatives and national efforts, have led to a significant increase in the scope and scale of marine conservation efforts globally [8]. Further, MPAs are just one tool in a suite of marine conservation and management actions – e.g., fisheries management, ecosystem-based management, marine spatial planning, nature-based adaptation measures, blue carbon projects, etc. – that are being promoted and implemented around the world in response to resource degradation, climate change and scarcity.

Yet in the push to rapidly increase marine management and conservation interventions with the aim of reversing downward environmental trends [8,9], there is a real danger that the marine conservation community may promote actions that are socially unjust or inappropriate. Past research has demonstrated unsatisfactory governance and decision-making processes and unintended negative social consequences that can occur in the creation of terrestrial protected areas in a variety of different settings [10–12]. Such critical reviews of conservation practice have documented a lack of consultation, physical displacement, perpetration of violence, cultural disruption, social marginalization, loss of livelihoods, and increased poverty. Recently, the UN Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council recently released a report on human rights violations related to conservation of terrestrial biodiversity [13].

While these types of issues have been long recognized in terrestrial conservation, there is evidence of similar problems occurring in some marine conservation initiatives. For example, recent accounts have documented marine conservation initiatives that lack consultation or consent prior to implementation [14–16], fail to account for the rights and needs of local people [17–19], physically displace communities [20,21], produce inequitable social impacts [22–24], disempower local communities [25,26] and undermine traditional and functioning resource management regimes [27]. These issues have led some scholars and practitioners to question whether some marine conservation initiatives should be labeled as a form of “ocean grabbing” when governance processes are poor or when rights and resources are taken from small-scale fishers, indigenous peoples, and/or coastal communities [28,29].

Issues such as these can produce several well-documented challenges for conservation. First, some actions might be deemed unjust or unlawful, which might lead to complaints to human rights bodies or lengthy court battles [13,17]. Actions that contravene fundamental human rights or ignore indigenous rights in the name of marine

conservation are not only unacceptable, they are also counter-productive. Second, for conservation funders and NGOs, these critiques also pose a significant risk to the “brand” of organizations and the social license of conservation [12,30]. This can lead to justifiable activism against individual NGOs or conservation by local communities, indigenous groups or small-scale fisheries organizations, or in global conservation fora [29,31–33]. Third, there is the risk that unacceptable governance, actions or impacts will produce local opposition, slow progress towards targets, and, ultimately, undermine the effectiveness and success of marine conservation [14,23].

We recognize that there are numerous examples of positive marine conservation initiatives that incorporate participatory planning processes [34–37], that have taken into account social and cultural considerations [38,39], that consider livelihoods and are co-managed [40–43], that recognize local and indigenous community initiatives to conserve local resources [25,35,44], and that have produced positive social outcomes to the benefit of natural resource management efforts [45–48]. Furthermore, generally speaking, there is good will within the international community to consider the concerns and needs of people when designing conservation actions. Marine conservation is often motivated by both ecological and social concerns [49]. There is also increasing attention to good governance [50,51] and the human dimensions of marine conservation [39,42,52,53]. Yet, overall, it is difficult to determine the extent to which past marine conservation processes and actions have been inclusive and just in practice. To improve the quality of governance, the social benefits and the success of marine conservation efforts, we feel it is justified and important for there to be a solid and defensible foundational platform for future action.

Thus, rather than dwell on past mistakes, we issue a call to action and propose a way forward to reduce the occurrence of poor governance and negative impacts in future efforts to achieve marine conservation objectives. Specifically, we argue that there is a well-recognized gap and need for a code of conduct to guide the actions of all members of the marine conservation community. This is exemplified by the increasing number of individuals and organizations – including local communities, practitioners, academics and NGOs – that are calling for a foundational set of guiding principles or social standards to guide conservation practitioners [28,54–56]. Notably, one outcome of a recent global Think Tank on the Human Dimensions of Large Scale Marine Protected Areas – attended by more than 125 scholars, practitioners, funders and managers from around the world – was a call by a group of those present for the development of such a code of conduct for marine conservation [57,58]. Many other professions, including doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants and teachers, have codes of conduct to establish a firm foundation for practice. However, there is no similar social standard or mechanism to guide the actions of individual conservation practitioners, organizations or governments or to hold them accountable. A *Hippocratic Oath* is needed for conservation.

## 2. Towards a code of conduct for marine conservation

Recognizing this gap and the perceived need for such a social standard, several of this paper's authors initiated a research project and collaborative process to explore and develop these ideas further. This included conducting a scoping review and convening an expert meeting. First, the three lead authors on this paper conducted a preliminary review of the literature and prepared an initial summative list of the principles that we found for further discussion at the expert meeting.

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