Testing the water: Understanding stakeholder readiness for strategic coastal and marine management

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ABSTRACT

We argue that stakeholder commitment and cooperation is essential for the success of strategic coastal and marine management initiatives and draw upon social identity theory to explain how inter-group relationships can either support or hinder cooperation across stakeholder groups. We analyse data from interviews carried out with 24 coastal and marine stakeholders from the Northern Territory, Australia, looking at how stakeholders describe their objectives for coastal and marine management and evidence of social identity effects either facilitating or impeding cooperation between stakeholders. While most participants sought improvements to coastal and marine management, only some were thinking in terms of a more regional-scale, forward-looking and integrated approach. Strong social identity effects inhibiting cooperation between stakeholders were evident in many of the interviews. However, the interviews also revealed shared objectives (e.g., the need for more data, to avoid duplication of effort, and more transparent and systematic decision-making) that could serve as a basis for developing a common social identity, and fostering the commitment and cooperation needed for strategic coastal and marine management initiatives.

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1. Introduction

There is an international move towards adopting more strategic, precautionary and integrated approaches to coastal and marine management (Forst, 2009; Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force, 2009; Partidario et al., 2009). A key challenge for the implementation of such approaches lies in achieving commitment from the relevant stakeholders — the range of groups either interested in, or affected by a decision (Hemmati, 2002). This commitment is vital to achieving a comprehensive understanding of the range of needs and values attributed to the coastal and marine environment, to bring together all the relevant data and to gain compliance with new regimes. The stakeholders for coastal and marine management decisions represent a broad range of interests and hold potentially conflicting values and attitudes towards the coastal and marine environment. We report on interviews carried out with coastal and marine stakeholders from the Northern Territory of Australia — a region that exemplifies many of the challenges associated with coastal and marine management. By exploring their objectives for coastal and marine management, the relationships between the different stakeholder groups, and the overlap in their interests, we draw out barriers and enablers of stakeholders' commitment and cooperation towards more strategic coastal and marine management.

1.1. Background

Globally, relevant international and government agencies are encouraging more strategic approaches to marine (and terrestrial) assessment, planning and management (e.g., UNEP, 2011). The new forms of coastal and marine management appear in a range of guises (see Gopnik, 2013 for a review), but they depart from previous marine planning and management initiatives in similar ways. That is, they represent a more coordinated or holistic approach

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(considering the cumulative and synergistic impacts of the range of coastal and ocean uses), they are forward-looking (considering the range of possible development options) and they apply to a larger area — focusing on regions or landscapes that match more closely to the scale of coastal and marine ecosystems (Chaker et al., 2005; Gopnik, 2013; Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force, 2009).

Analyses of early experiences with strategic coastal and marine management highlight the importance of stakeholder cooperation and commitment for their success. In the first instance, collecting and integrating data at a regional level, encompassing all of the activities (and impacts) occurring in this coastal and marine environment requires a significant investment of time and effort for all stakeholders (Chaker et al., 2005; Kannen, 2012). As well as environmental data, comprehensive public and stakeholder input is necessary to understand the interests and values that need to be balanced and the compatibilities and conflicts between these interests (Pomeroy and Douvere, 2008; Ravesteijn et al., 2014; Samhouri et al., 2014).

Second, difficulties associated with evaluating the impact of coastal and marine activities have the potential to create conflict between stakeholders. Baseline data are often unavailable (Wright, 2007) and there is still much to be understood about the structure and resilience of complex coastal and marine ecosystems. Thus, there is likely to be considerable uncertainty associated with judgements about the cumulative and synergistic impacts of coastal and marine activities or the resilience of coastal and marine ecosystems. It is also challenging to reach agreement as to how objectives for marine management (qualitative statements) should be translated into quantifiable measures as there are a multitude of ways in which objectives such as 'sustainable marine ecosystem' can be understood, defined and measured (Mee et al., 2008). As each stakeholder group has different interests, priorities and experiences, they will tend to interpret these objectives differently (Chaker et al., 2005; Kannen, 2012). This ambiguity and uncertainty leaves considerable room for stakeholders to employ politics and influence to derail efforts to balance competing interests (Brown et al., 2001), with the end result that objectives are not realised. Thus, stakeholder commitment is also necessary in order to reach agreement and support decisions made under conditions of high uncertainty and ambiguity.

The scale of strategic coastal and marine management also creates challenges. The larger scale of these strategic initiatives is meant to match better with ecologically defined regions but in reality, ecological systems often fall under the jurisdiction of multiple levels of government, leading to a lack of broad and effective guidance (Lazarow et al., 2006). Coastal and marine governance is traditionally managed by multiple agencies, each with distinct roles and responsibilities, meaning that there is no clear authority with responsibility for ensuring that management plans are implemented effectively (Gopnik, 2013). When different stakeholder groups have to respond to different regulatory regimes, and there is no overarching authority to ensure that these regulatory regimes align with the goals of the strategic management plan, there is an inherent motivation for stakeholders to focus on traditional regulatory requirements rather than the strategic objectives. On the other hand, the high level of species mobility and connectivity in the marine environment means that actions on the part of one group (to uphold the new management strategy) are undermined if other stakeholders do not buy into the strategy. Thus, while a coordinated approach is critical for successful implementation of strategic coastal and marine management, existing governance systems are likely to encourage stakeholders to focus narrowly on their own interests (Ounanian et al., 2012).

Stakeholder cooperation and commitment is essential to surmount the inherent challenges associated with strategic coastal and marine management initiatives. When stakeholders are committed to the goals of strategic coastal and marine planning and willing to cooperate with one another to achieve those goals, better data will be available to inform decisions, and a better understanding of the compatibilities and conflicts between the different interests is achieved (Brown et al., 2001; Gilliland and Laffoley, 2008; Pomeroy and Douvere, 2008). Stakeholders' cooperation and commitment can also help towards resolving the different perspectives as to the most appropriate measures and standards to be used to monitor impacts and measure objectives. Finally, since existing governance arrangements may not be well aligned with the objectives of strategic coastal and marine management, stakeholder commitment and cooperation is also essential to support the implementation of the proposed management strategies (Brown et al., 2001; Gilliland and Laffoley, 2008; Pomeroy and Douvere, 2008).

Stakeholders' commitment to strategic coastal and marine management will reflect the extent to which they see a need for a more regional-scale, forward looking and integrated approach to coastal and marine management. However, their willingness to cooperate with other stakeholders will also depend on the nature of the relationships between stakeholder groups. Below, we draw upon a psychological framework that is specifically concerned with this issue, namely, social identity theory and show how it can be used to identify factors that either enable or hinder cooperative efforts between stakeholder groups.

1.2. Social identity theory

Social identity theory explains the way in which our individual perceptions and behaviour are influenced by our group memberships. According to the social identity approach (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987), a person's sense of belonging to certain groups, and the value and emotional significance of those memberships, represents an important part of our self-concept. When we define ourselves in terms of one of our group memberships (i.e., when we adopt a particular social identity) our perceptions and behaviour are guided by the norms of that social category or group. Because our group memberships form part of our self-concept and thus affect our self-esteem, we also seek to positively differentiate our own group (the 'in-group') from an 'out-group.' Consequently, group members will tend to emphasise those standards or qualities that reflect favourably on their own group relative to the relevant out-group. The out-group is whatever group is most salient and different from the in-group in that situation. Research shows that when a social identity is primed, it affects our behaviour such that we make decisions and allocate resources in ways that favour members of the in-group relative to the out-group (Tajfel et al., 1971). Furthermore, when we define ourselves as belonging to a particular group (e.g., recreational fisher), we become compliant (willing to conform to group norms and follow rules) and cooperate more (help others, engage in citizenship behaviours) with other members of this group.

While the social identity approach originated in the field of social psychology, it has been applied to understand behaviour in the realm of natural resource management. For example, Fielding et al. (2008) found that farmers' intentions to engage in sustainable agricultural practices were influenced by their identification with the group of growers in their region and whether or not they believed that engaging in these sustainable practices was characteristic behaviour for growers in their region. Mason et al. (2014) found that Australians' attitudes towards the mining industry changed as their social identity changed, such that they showed more positive attitudes towards mining companies when they