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Management effectiveness in UNESCO Biosphere Reserves: Learning from Canadian periodic reviews

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ABSTRACT

Calls for management effectiveness of protected areas have been made on the grounds that evaluation can help determine the ability of protected areas to meet their goals, identify opportunities and threats, and encourage stakeholders to adapt to changing conditions. In 1995, the Statutory Framework of the World Network of biosphere reserves included a requirement that all biosphere reserves must undergo a process of periodic review once every 10 years. The primary purpose of the periodic review is to evaluate the effectiveness of biosphere reserve organizations in achieving the objectives related to three functions: biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and logistical support. Beyond meeting statutory requirements, the periodic review process can also be considered an opportunity for learning within and beyond the national and international networks. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how management effectiveness in Canadian biosphere reserves has been interpreted through the periodic review process conducted in Canada. A content analysis was performed on the 15 periodic review reports of the 11 Canadian biosphere reserves reviewed between 1995 and 2012. Determining compliance appears to be the dominant purpose of periodic reviews, while determining and providing learning opportunities through periodic review is emerging. We conclude that periodic reviews can be used as learning tools if systematic efforts are made to evaluate, reflect, and share lessons learned. Specific recommendations are provided to enhance this possibility.

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1. Introduction

As the number and size of protected areas around the globe have increased since the latter part of the 20th Century, so too, have calls for their greater accountability, good governance, and effective management (Hockings et al., 2006a,b; Lockwood, 2010; Leverington et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2012). Simultaneously, there have been concerns that the establishment of protected areas has compromised community well-being and that the rights of and responsibilities to rural and indigenous peoples have not always been respected (Adams

and Hutton, 2007; Reed, 2009; Berghöfer, 2010). World biosphere reserves (BRs), first established in the mid-1970s under the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program of the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are not solely protected areas because they include areas of increasing human activity and have a mandate to act as theaters to reconcile human-nature interactions (UNESCO, 1996). However, because they also contain strictly protected areas at their core, BRs have not been immune from these calls and concerns related to protected areas (e.g., Ghimire, 1991; Nyakweba, 1993; for discussion, see Price, 1996; Reed and Massie, 2012).

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Numbering 610 sites in 117 countries (UNESCO, 2012), BRs have been promoted as 'living laboratories' or 'learning sites' to help scientists, managers, and more recently, local communities better understand how to achieve conservation of biodiversity and sustainability (e.g., Batisse, 1982; Schultz and Lundholm, 2010). While originally established to protect biological diversity and support associated research, the purpose of BRs has expanded so that today they carry out three functions: promote the conservation of biological and cultural diversity; advance the aims of sustainable development; and provide logistical support for research, learning, and public education (UNESCO, 2000). Yet, determining whether BRs have been effective for learning about and advancing conservation of biological diversity and sustainable development is a significant challenge.

Literature in management effectiveness of protected areas suggests that evaluation can be a tool for understanding the impacts of current management strategies, addressing emerging threats and opportunities (Hockings et al., 2006a,b; Lu et al., 2012), and promoting adaptive management (Heck et al., 2011a). Marc Hockings and others (2006a, pp. 635–636) argue that such evaluation can be viewed as "a positive process, which allows us to correct and learn from our mistakes and build on success." This perspective is shared in the broader literature on environmental management that emphasizes the value of systematic learning through evaluation, reflection and feedback to enhance the capacity to adapt to changing and uncertain environmental, social, and economic circumstances (e.g., Plummer and Fitzgibbon, 2004; Plummer and Armitage, 2010; Berkes, 2010). Hence, evaluation through periodic review can be used to determine whether a BR is complying with its mandate and as a tool for learning about and improving management practice.

With these considerations in mind, the purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which both compliance and learning objectives have been addressed in the periodic reviews of Canadian BRs. At present, there are 16 BRs in Canada. From 1995 to present, 11 Canadian BRs have been subject to review; four of these have been reviewed twice. This extensive set allows for consideration of changing priorities over time, an examination of how the MAB program (within which BRs are established) has been interpreted and implemented on the ground within a national setting, and an opportunity to share lessons across the international network and to other types of protected area designations. We have organized the paper as follows. First, we draw on academic and practitioner literature to provide a rationale for evaluating management effectiveness of BRs and explain interpretations of "compliance" and "learning". Next, we describe the periodic review process for BRs as practiced in Canada, the data set we used, and the type of analysis undertaken. Third, our analysis focuses on evidence of compliance and of learning in Canadian periodic reviews. Specific attention was given to whether there were differences between reserves designated before 1995 when there was a major policy shift for the international program, and those designated after 1995. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the practice of evaluation in Canadian BRs, in the world network, and in protected areas more broadly.

2. Reviewing protected areas for management effectiveness

Assessing management effectiveness of protected areas has taken place since the mid-1990s, when methodologies emerged using the framework agreed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and its World Commission on Protected Areas. In 2002, the Convention on Biological Diversity adopted a program of work that included the specific goal "to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of protected areas management" including, by 2010, the establishment of "frameworks for monitoring, evaluating and reporting protected areas management effectiveness" (Convention on Biological Diversity 2012).

According to researchers working in protected areas internationally, management effectiveness evaluation is defined as "the assessment of how well the protected area is being managed – primarily the extent to which it is protecting values and achieving goals and objectives" (Hockings et al., 2006b, p. 1). Hockings and others (2006b, p. xiii), suggested that management effectiveness can be made operational according to three main themes: (i) design issues relating to both individual sites and protected area systems; (ii) adequacy and appropriateness of management systems and processes; and (iii) delivery of protected area objectives including conservation values. All three themes figure in BR reviews. Reviewers are required to understand whether the structure of zones within the BR – i.e., its design – is sufficient to meet BR objectives. Additionally, in keeping with the Statutory Framework of 1995, reviewers have also drawn attention to whether management and governance systems are adequate for assuring that biodiversity conservation and sustainable development objectives are addressed.

Depending on the design and implementation of an evaluation, it can support and enable effective resource allocation; promote accountability and transparency to stakeholders and the general public (Lu et al., 2012); help involve the community and promote the value of protected areas; and enable adaptive approach to protected areas management (Leverington and Hockings, 2004; Hockings et al., 2006a). Ideally, good systems for determining management effectiveness will help managers and communities learn about the effects of human activities on environmental values and contribute to better decision-making and management practice (Conley and Moote, 2003; Bertzky and Stoll-Kleemann, 2009). Importantly, Hockings and others (2006b, p. 5) suggest that "evaluation should be seen primarily as a tool to assist managers in their work, not as a system for watching and punishing managers for inadequate performance. Evaluation must be used positively to support managers and be seen as a normal part of the process of management". They go on to say "evaluation can improve effectiveness in a number of related procedural and substantive ways – for example by: encouraging a learning organization and culture; informing management planning; and providing positive reinforcement when protected area management is effective (Hockings et al., 2006b, p. 6). Two threads run through this literature: effectiveness as determined by compliance and effectiveness as determined by learning. Each is discussed briefly below.

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