



A stakeholder analysis of U.S. marine aquaculture partnerships



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 November 2014

Received in revised form

16 February 2015

Accepted 13 March 2015

Keywords:

Collaboration

Policy

Survey

Advocacy coalition framework

ABSTRACT

U.S. states are increasingly using multi-stakeholder groups to advise on marine aquaculture policy and research development. Such groups typically include some mix of government (e.g., tribal, federal, state, or local) and non-governmental (e.g., private, non-profit, or university) stakeholders. The engagement of such multi-stakeholder groups in the marine aquaculture policy process allows governments to harness the expertise of vested policy stakeholders and ensure that policy solutions are contextually appropriate. Taking stock of the participants in these groups is an important first step in understanding the broader role they play in the aquaculture policy process. In this article, a stakeholder analysis of ten multi-stakeholder groups engaged in aquaculture policy development, referred to as aquaculture partnerships, is conducted based on conceptual guidance from the Advocacy Coalition Framework. In the context of these 10 partnerships, partnerships' participant compositions as well as inter-sectoral differences relating to (i) aquaculture policy beliefs; (ii) problem perceptions; (iii) resources; (iv) trust perceptions; (v) coordination patterns; and (vi) factors based upon which individuals coordinate with others in their partnerships are identified. Results from the stakeholder analysis show that partnerships have substantial representation from government and non-government policy stakeholders, that leveraging expertise through the collaborative policymaking process is critical, and that even within these multi-stakeholder groups, government actors maintain a critical position.

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1. Introduction

Governments around the world are actively engaged in aquaculture policy development in response to the rapid growth of the industry [1]. As seen in other industrial contexts, the establishment of industry regulations can lead to a standardization in producer practices as well as foster perceptions of industrial legitimacy among consumers [2]. However, policy development can be complicated by a variety of industry specific factors. In the case of aquaculture, policy development is challenged by the simultaneous need for both broad solutions that can be applied uniformly across the industry as well as nuanced regulations that account for the environmental, economic, and social characteristics unique to marine aquaculture production in different contexts [3]. Indeed, the biophysical landscapes, array of policy stakeholders, species being produced, and types of economic competition can be vastly different from place to place. As such, aquaculture policy development in the U.S. has largely been devolved to the state level. This decentralization in regulatory responsibility allows states the flexibility to craft policy solutions appropriate for their respective contexts.

To further ensure the contextual appropriateness of state marine aquaculture policy, governments have relied on multi-stakeholder groups comprised of diverse policy stakeholders (e.g., government representatives, aquaculture producers, university researchers, members of the public, etc.) that have vested policy interests and/or expertise relating to some dimension of aquaculture production. Governments rely on the knowledge and viewpoints of these groups as reflected in their policy recommendations, reports, and other outputs, in the development of state level policies. In some cases, these groups have been established through a state mandate. Other times, these are extra-governmental entities that emerge organically among vested policy stakeholders.

Taking stock of the participants in these groups is an important first step to understanding the broader role they play in the policy process. After all, different stakeholders bring with them varying beliefs and perceptions that can profoundly impact the work and outcomes of the groups in which they are engaged [4]. In this article, we conduct a stakeholder analysis of 10 multi-stakeholder groups engaged in aquaculture policy development, or what we refer to as aquaculture partnerships, based on conceptual guidance from the Advocacy Coalition Framework [4]. Aquaculture partnerships include some mix of government (e.g., tribal, federal, state, or local) and non-governmental stakeholders (e.g., private, non-profit, or university). In the context of these 10 partnerships, we identify partnerships'

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participant compositions as well as inter-sectoral differences relating to (i) aquaculture policy beliefs; (ii) problem perceptions; (iii) resources; (iv) trust perceptions; (v) coordination patterns; and (vi) factors based upon which individuals coordinate with others in their partnerships. Ultimately, by examining stakeholder attributes in the context of aquaculture partnerships, one can gain key insights into the differential belief, capacity, and perceptual characteristics of individuals involved in shaping the governance of marine aquaculture.

1.1. Study setting: U.S. marine aquaculture

Aquaculture is officially defined as “the breeding, rearing, and harvesting of plants and animals in all types of water environments, including ponds, rivers, lakes, and the ocean” [5]. Though capture fisheries production has plateaued over the last three decades, the aquaculture industry has seen an annual growth rate of 8.3% worldwide [1]. According to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, this makes it the fastest growing form of food production in the world [1]. Globally, government involvement in aquaculture in the form of economic incentives and regulations has increased in tandem with industry growth [6], though there is significant variation between countries in the quantity and design of aquaculture regulations as well as monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to support them [7].

Aquaculture is an increasingly salient issue in the U.S. The U.S. currently imports about 91% of the seafood it consumes [8], resulting in a seafood trade deficit of \$11.2 billion [9]. Aquaculture development in the U.S. faces a number of barriers: an uncertain regulatory landscape [10,11], complex interdependencies among ecological, economic, technical, and social factors [10], resistance from the general public regarding farmed seafood [12,13], conflict about aquaculture development [14], and numerous concerns about the industry from disease control to degradation of marine ecosystems [15–18,12].

Over the past several years, numerous partnerships have materialized across the U.S. with the intent to overcome these barriers by bringing together various, and often diverse, interests associated with the development of the marine aquaculture industry. These partnerships typically include participation by government regulatory agencies charged with shepherding the development of the industry, natural resource management and environmental regulatory agencies, representatives from the aquaculture industry, environmental non-governmental organizations, research or scientific organizations, and commercial fisheries, and land owners and other unaffiliated parties. These partnerships can be formed by statute (i.e., as advisory bodies) or organically resulting from the interaction among diverse policy stakeholders. In either case, they typically advise on the development of aquaculture policy or research, or both. They are thus important players in the marine aquaculture policy process warranting closer attention to their composition, capacity, collaborative process, and participants' beliefs and problem perceptions. In the following sections, we describe the conceptual lenses and methodological techniques we applied to study these important dimensions among a representative sample of 10 marine aquaculture partnerships.

2. Conceptual basis

The involvement of multi-stakeholder groups in the policy process to advise government agencies and policymakers has become increasingly prevalent in recent decades. In part, this is a product of formal legislative initiatives to increase the participation of policy stakeholders in regulatory decision making processes [19]. A chief example is the Federal Advisory Committee Act

of 1972. Rationales for such formal initiatives are both normative and practical. From a value standpoint, the increased inclusion of a wider array of interests and entities in the policy process supports democratic values of representativeness and accountability [20]. Practically, external stakeholders are valued participants in the policy process because of the topical expertise or technical information they bring to it [21]. Representativeness and technical expertise, together, are expected to ensure the contextual appropriateness of policy solutions.

Representativeness and expertise based rationales also drive the trend toward collaborative policymaking more broadly, which offers additional explanation for the increased engagement of wider networks of stakeholders in the policy process. The broader concept of collaborative policymaking can be formally (i.e., by law) or informally (i.e., by norm or ad hoc) manifested but involves the convening of public and private stakeholders together in collective forums, with variable frequency and terms, to discuss or negotiate public policy within a broadly defined issue area [22]. Collaborative policymaking in the policy process has been particularly notable in the context of natural resource management [23] with the expectation that it will help harness expert knowledge, reduce the potential for policy-related conflict, increase policy receptivity, and facilitate shared understandings of policy problems and solutions [24–26].

The collaborative governance approach is observed in various settings, from organizational and administrative to policy [27]. It has been found that who participates in collaborative processes in any of these settings can dramatically influence what occurs therein [28]. The peculiarities of the policy context punctuate this expectation. Policymaking is a process wherein problems are variably defined, technical disputes are rampant, and beliefs drive participants to strategically network [29], share and employ resources, and strategize to influence public policy [30,4,31]. A logical *a priori* assumption in multi-stakeholder policy groups is that the different stakeholders that sit at the table come with varying perspectives and material (e.g., financial) and non-material (e.g., influence) resources [32] to affect policy change. Thus, especially in the policy context, taking stock of the stakeholder dynamics of collaborative groups is crucial. Such knowledge is necessary for understanding whether and how they will potentially affect the policy process.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) [33] is a valuable lens for characterizing stakeholder dynamics within collective policy processes. The ACF draws conceptual attention to the beliefs, networks, resources, and activities of vested policy stakeholders in such processes in relation to policy behavior and change [30]. Beliefs are an important conceptual anchor in the ACF as they are presumed to be the foundation of individuals' political decision making [34]. The ACF posits that individuals exhibit policy preferences that reflect their underlying beliefs [31]. Further, that they strategically network with other policy stakeholders, employ material and non-material resources, and pursue activities to change policy in accordance with these beliefs and associated preferences. The ACF thus places emphasis on identifying individual assumptions and characteristics as an important foundation for understanding the role of policy stakeholders, individually and in groups, in shaping policy outcomes. Scholars have applied the ACF to descriptively identify the main stakeholders within policy subsystems, their policy beliefs and preferences, collaboration and trust among them, their access to financial, scientific, technical, and stakeholder support, and levels of influence over policy outcomes [35]. Trust is often assessed in collective policy settings as it can be a critical factor in overcoming collection action dilemmas [35,36]. In this research, the ACF is used as a lens to organize a descriptive study of the characteristics of stakeholders involved in collaborative policymaking groups in U.S. aquaculture. In particular, we relied on the ACF and recent applications thereof to identify relevant categories of variables along which

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