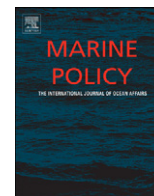




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Marine protected areas: Re-thinking their inception

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ABSTRACT

When marine protected areas (MPAs) do not succeed, which is often the case, their failure is mostly attributed to factors related to their design and operation. In this paper, it is argued that reasons for lack of success must be sought in the process that leads up to their establishment, i.e., the initial stage when the idea was conceived, communicated, and discussed among stakeholders. To illustrate the significance of the 'step zero', the creation of four MPAs in Spain and México is analyzed. These case studies show how MPA proposals can easily be drawn not only into power struggles between stakeholders but also into political issues that extend far beyond the MPA itself. For this reason, the governance of MPAs requires broad considerations of the potential political risks and pitfalls. MPAs are, after all, not just a technical management measure, but a socio-political enterprise.

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Introduction

Despite the recognized complexity surrounding marine ecosystems, management practices are based mostly on readily available tools, some of which end up being treated as simple technical and institutional fixes [1,2]. Marine protected areas (MPAs) are among them. Although similar measures have been used for centuries in different parts of the world, e.g., Oceania and Micronesia [3–5], their development in western societies is relatively recent, starting with the First World Conference on National Parks in 1962, where the need to protect marine and coastal areas was emphasized [6]. Since then, MPAs have attained a status as one of the most widely promoted tools for conservation and resource management. There are many reasons why MPAs have broad appeal. Conceptually, they correspond with the precautionary principle when faced with unknown consequences, which is largely the case with complex marine ecosystems [7]. In addition to their conservation outcome, socio-economic benefits

can also be derived from many different human uses, from fishing to tourism [8].

The need for protection of ecosystems globally provides justification for all levels of governments to create MPAs. However, despite the progress made in previous decades, the spread and coverage of MPAs fall far short of the targets set by international organizations, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which proposed the protection of 10% of all eco-regions in the world (including marine and coastal areas) before 2010 [9]. At the end of 2010, only 1.17% of the world's oceans were designated as MPAs, and probably for this reason the countries that signed the CBD extended the deadline until 2020 [10].

The slow rate of MPA establishment [11,12] and their relative lack of success or effectiveness raise doubts about what MPAs can offer [13–15]. When they do not succeed, it can be mostly attributed to the design of the MPAs, relative to the specificity of the marine systems within which they are meant to operate. Efforts have been concentrated therefore on adjusting their functions and associated rules and regulations in order to improve their performance [16,17]. However, not all failures can be remedied by reorganization and enhancing capacity in monitoring and enforcement. When MPAs do not deliver what they intend to do, the damage may already be beyond repair. For instance, stakeholders may then have lost faith in the MPA and stopped supporting it.

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As argued in this paper, it is imperative that an investigation into MPA failure or success examines the implementation process, starting with the very step when the idea about the MPA is first introduced. This is referred to as the 'step zero' of implementation [18], which is when the problem to be addressed is initially observed and defined and when discussion begins about how to address it and by what instruments. MPAs may come up in this process for reasons that need to be investigated. For instance, it should be asked why MPAs are perceived as a good idea and by whom. The step zero investigation is also about assessing how the concept is communicated and what responses it triggers.

In what follows, the step zero of MPAs is theorized to explain the significance of the pre-implementation stage and which concepts and questions are relevant. Next, the descriptions of what happened in the process of establishing four MPAs in Spain and México are presented. The point here is to demonstrate how MPA proposals can easily be drawn not only into power struggles between stakeholders but also into political issues that extend far beyond the MPA itself [19]. Lessons learned from these case studies are summarized in the final section.

Theorizing step zero

MPAs come in many forms, such as closed areas, no-take reserves, and multiple use zoning [5,20,21]. They are versatile, and with a proper design, can be tailored to local circumstances [22–24]. The short supply of MPA success stories, despite widespread application around the world, may suggest that they are not panaceas, in many instances. In other words, MPAs are not simple technical and institutional fixes that can be easily applied to manage any marine resource systems. In addition to the fact that MPAs may not be the right tool for all situations, 'doing it right' is also difficult [25,26]. Critical examination of what contributes to such difficulties is needed, given the possible social and ecological consequences of MPAs. Few studies have made the link between this to the MPA creation process [27–30].

Drawing from interactive governance theory [31], the implementation of MPAs should be seen as a process where stakeholders representing governments, markets, and civil society participate in the discussion about what they are for, why they are needed, where they should be located, and how they should operate. People have things at stake when MPAs are introduced, meaning that they may stand to gain or lose from them. Generally, they have clearer ideas about the latter than the former [23]. Therefore, it is hard to predict at the outset what might end up being the goal of MPAs, given that goals may shift as people become involved in the process [24]. When interests collide, one would expect a process characterized by conflicts where outcomes are less than certain. In fact, the only way to anticipate what MPAs may become would be to analyze where power sits and how politics work at different levels.

The reasons for conflicts may also be due to the fact that stakeholders representing different normative orders may exert their power in defining the problem and the process. For instance, the values, principles, and rules of the community may depart from those of the government, leading to contestation about how the MPA should be designed and governed. This situation is referred to as legal pluralism [32], which suggests that MPAs are not introduced in a social, cultural, political, and legal vacuum. Rather, they are situated within a larger sphere where stakeholder conflicts may already occur. Therefore, the introduction of MPAs may bring up issues that are sensitive but have been previously dormant, and which some stakeholders might prefer to remain so, for the sake of harmony in the community or to serve their special interests. As Goffman [33] argued, avoidance is

a way to deal with sensitive issues in social interactions, which is impossible to do when MPAs are in the room. It may also be the case that MPAs, however well intended by those who initiate them, may invoke images of previous management experiences that proved to be unsuccessful or had repercussions for the community or for particular stakeholders. In fact, stakeholders may perceive MPAs as just another effort to exert social control and repression by central governments [34]. For that reason an analysis of the step zero of MPAs, and why they end up being so politicized, should also target the images that stakeholders have about their situation as well as those of others involved in the process and who are exerting their interests in shaping the outcome [23].

Since politics is a dynamic process characterized by differential stakeholder power [35], the objectives of the MPA may change in the inception process depending on how the balance of power shifts. This is also partly due to the fact that not all stakeholders arrive at the process at the same time. As a consequence, those involved at the beginning may not carry the most weight at the end. By the same token, those who are most affected by the original problems and concerns leading to the establishment of the MPA may not be the ones holding the stage at the end of the step zero [24]. Stakeholders may well be aware of the risks involved when they initiate MPAs and are, therefore, more cautious in their actions. How winning and losing stakeholders responds to the negotiated outcomes is an important research question because it may have a decisive effect in the long term. Thus, what warrants a sharper focus on the step zero of MPAs is not only the political turmoil they may trigger, but also the path dependency that may occur as a result. Things that may seem expedient in the moment, i.e., as a solution to an immediate problem, may turn out not to be productive or conducive in the long run. As much as conflicts at the initial stage may affect the entire MPA process, decisions about stakeholder representation, rules of participation, and the chosen forms and avenues for communication may influence how things later evolve. Things said and done in the beginning may create an atmosphere that may taint the process, inhibiting constructive deliberation and cooperation. Further, once representation is defined, it may be hard to change. Similarly, once images about the MPA have been crystallized, they tend to remain, despite new experiences, due perhaps to institutional inertia. When rules are established, they quickly become interpreted as objective reality and hence are not easy to imagine differently [36].

The step zero analysis is concerned with the conditions, drivers, and processes prior to the inception of MPAs. These are embedded in the social, cultural, and political contexts underlying their conception and establishment. The pre-implementation stage is concerned with questions about who brings up the idea about MPAs and why, as well as how this idea is conceptualized and communicated among stakeholders. It further asks who these stakeholders are, who they represent, why and how they become involved, and what legitimacy they possess. Finally, the analysis focuses on the deliberation about the MPA, i.e., about how stakeholders argue, influence, and dominate discussions and decisions about its establishment. All relevant attributes brought to the process must also be examined, be they knowledge, power or images about the situation that the MPA is intended to address.

Case studies

The four MPA case studies analyzed in this article are at different stages in the establishment process. They serve as illustrations of the challenges and political obstacles that arise from the moment the idea for MPAs is conceived. They reveal the

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