



Beyond traditional stakeholder engagement: Public participation roles in California's statewide marine protected area planning process

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ABSTRACT

Public participation was one of the hallmarks of the California Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) Initiative, a planning process to support the redesign of California's system of marine protected areas (MPAs). The MLPA Initiative implemented innovative and unconventional public outreach and engagement strategies to assist local communities share relevant knowledge and data, and provide timely and targeted contributions to MPA planning discussions. This collaborative model helped broaden traditional forms of participation to ensure public input received and integrated into MPA planning legitimately reflected the interests and priorities of California's coastal communities. A number of considerations were critical to the success of this collaborative approach, including: understanding the needs and limitations of public audiences; working directly with communities to identify appropriate outreach and engagement strategies; prioritizing strategies that supported a multi-directional exchange of information; adapting strategies based on public feedback and internal lessons learned; and hiring professional public engagement specialists. Strategies evolved over time and increased the level and quality of public participation over this multi-stage planning process. Experiences gained from the MLPA Initiative can be used to encourage consideration of collaborative participation in other environmental planning and decision-making processes.

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1. Introduction

Resource managers are continually challenged with making high-quality decisions while remaining responsive to the public those decisions affect (Beierle, 1998). Meeting this challenge within the environmental policy arena presents particular hurdles, as issues are often technically complex and value-laden, and multiple interests operate in a fluctuating atmosphere of dissention and distrust (Beierle, 1998; Fischer, 2000a, b; Jasanoff, 2005). Advancing solutions

to environmental problems often requires changes in individual behavior, demanding policymakers to target and involve the public as they would corporations and other affected organizations (National Research Council, 2008). Addressing this challenging set of conditions requires flexible and transparent decision-making that embraces local knowledge and a diversity of values (Reed, 2008). The California Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) Initiative (Initiative) provides a notable example of addressing – and adapting to – the complexities, uncertainties, and value conflicts common to environmental planning and decision-making.

Since the 1970s, requirements have been embedded in virtually all U.S. environmental legislation (Creighton, 2005), as well as many countries worldwide (Buchy and Race, 2001; OECD, 2001; Nysten, 2002), to ensure the public's involvement and full access to policy information. Traditionally, “public participation” has been defined as legally required, one-way dialogue between the public and lawmakers (e.g., voting, forming interest groups, demonstrating, lobbying) in which agencies inform the public after determining

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a course of action (Beierle, 1998; Innes and Booher, 2004). While this approach may provide a mechanism for decision-makers to deliver pre-determined information to the public, it misses the opportunity for the public to directly inform and influence environmental policy processes, products, and outcomes.

To improve the quality, legitimacy, and capacity of environmental decisions, public participation has begun to include more direct roles for involvement and dialogue, such as formal comments, public hearings, and citizen suits (National Research Council 2008). In recent years, the public has also helped to inform a wide range of planning and decision-making processes by participating in stakeholder, also referred to as citizen, advisory groups (Crowfoot and Wondolleck, 1990; Beatley et al., 1994; Patterson, 1999; McCool and Guthrie, 2001). While critics raise concerns about the drawbacks of a more involved public (King, 1998; Innes and Booher, 2004; Bora and Hausendorf, 2006; Abels, 2007; Reed, 2008), the benefits of two-way interactions between the public and decision-makers have been widely advocated as a way to increase the legitimacy and quality of government decisions (National Research Council, 1996; Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Abelson et al., 2003; Daley, 2007; Fox et al., 2013a). This includes decision-making within the field of resource management (Fischer, 2000a, b; Beierle, 2002; Reed et al., 2009) and more specifically, marine spatial planning (Pomeroy and Douvère, 2008).

While improvements have been made to broaden traditional participation models, people leading decision-making processes still struggle to offer inclusive engagement opportunities reflective of the diverse communities such policy decisions affect. A “collaborative participation” model challenges traditional forms of participation and proposes a new way of conceptualizing participation and engaging the public in planning and decision-making (Innes and Booher, 2004). Collaborative participation engages the public, process participants, and decision-makers in a multi-dimensional dialogue so that policies, interests, and the public co-evolve (Innes and Booher, 2004).

This paper explores the implementation of innovative and unconventional outreach and engagement strategies to promote participation beyond traditional stakeholder and public involvement in a statewide marine protected area (MPA) planning process. From 2004 to 2011, the Initiative adopted a collaborative approach to support a multi-way dialogue and interaction among the public, scientists, resource managers, agency staff, appointed stakeholder advisory groups, and policy advisors. Regional¹ outreach and engagement strategies were designed to recognize the value in relationship building among a diverse public, the power of open and honest multi-dimensional dialogue, and the advantages of integrating public input and interests into process outcomes. Considering the diverse and complex communities that make up the State of California, outreach and engagement strategies required “out of the box” thinking, and were adapted to public feedback, lessons learned assessments, community needs, and available resources. “Best practices” highlighted in literature were also incorporated, including: involving the public early and investing in the advance planning of public participation (Chess and Purcell, 1999; Webler and Tuler, 2006); ensuring participants have the power to influence decisions (Fiorino, 1990; Laird, 1993; Chase et al., 2004; Tippet et al., 2007); understanding the needs and concerns of participants and communities (Salm et al., 2000); using multiple methods for participation (e.g.,

workshops, meetings, advisory committees, etc.) (Torgerson, 1986); providing technical assistance to the public (Richards et al., 2004); encouraging participation of native peoples (Elder, 1982; Torgerson, 1986); and conducting vigorous outreach and engaging liaisons to encourage public participation (Young et al., 1993).

For the purposes of this paper, “public participation” refers to the Initiative’s collaborative participation model designed to actively engage local communities and members of the general public in multi-directional dialogue (and as explored in Innes and Booher (2004)). Conventional and unconventional outreach and engagement strategies described in this paper denote the mechanisms and tools developed to support and promote this collaborative approach. All other types of public participation, including legally mandated participation and/or involvement of stakeholder advisory groups are separately identified or referred to as “traditional” outreach. The co-authors of this paper were directly involved in the Initiative planning process; thus, the paper reflects a “participant-observer” perspective.

2. Background

Enacted in 1999, the MLPA directs the state of California to reevaluate and redesign its system of MPAs to increase its coherence and effectiveness at protecting the state’s marine life, habitat, and ecosystems (Fish and Game Code § 2853 (a)).² Following two unsuccessful efforts to implement the MLPA between 2000 and 2002, the Initiative was launched to assist in facilitating a regional MPA planning process. A public-private partnership, the Initiative began as a pilot project along the central coast, and ultimately completed planning for four regions between 2004 and 2011 (Kirlin et al., 2013; Gleason et al., 2013).

Given the mandate of the MLPA, and specifically the potential impacts certain MPA designations may have on ocean user groups and regional communities, this high-profile environmental policy attracted broad public interest among diverse constituencies. Proponents and opponents of the MLPA were active throughout the planning process, which provided an opportunity to develop uncommon, cross-interest relationships between individuals and groups who might otherwise refrain from working together. Involving such a diverse and involved public also presented its challenges, particularly surrounding issues of fear and misinformation. The planning process was designed to help ensure individual interests could be voiced, heard, and considered during the development of MPA proposals. It is important to note that while the Initiative provided members of the public extensive opportunities to advise the state in redesigning MPAs, the MLPA was already established as state law, a point of great contention among some members of the public.

2.1. Informing a collaborative participation approach

The Initiative’s approach to participation was informed by two early state efforts to redesign California’s system of MPAs (Wieble

¹ The Initiative took a regional approach to MPA planning, which involved a tailored planning process for each geographic region. MPA planning is complete for all four open coastal regions: Central Coast (2005–2006), North Central Coast (2007–2008), South Coast (2008–2009), and North Coast (2010–2011). For additional details on the planning process, see Kirlin et al., 2013.

² The MLPA requires using the best readily available science in the redesign process, as well as the advice and assistance of scientists, resource managers, experts, stakeholders, and members of the public (for additional information about the MLPA, the Initiative, and affiliated groups see Kirlin et al., 2013). MPA design, adoption and implementation is guided by the Marine Managed Areas Improvement Act (Public Resources Code §36,600–36,900) and the draft *California Marine Life Protection Act Master Plan for Marine Protected Areas*, a living document that provides, among other things, information about California’s MPAs, regional adaptive management plans, lessons learned, and an outline of scientific methodology for monitoring and evaluation (2008). Recommendations developed during MPA planning were provided to a state regulatory body, the California Fish and Game Commission, for each of the four open coast regions.

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