

What do you know now that you wish you knew when you got started in MPAs? Insights from practitioners

Much of what we learn – in the MPA field and in life in general – is not from formal education. It comes from learning it ourselves, or receiving advice from a colleague, or simply trial and error. This kind of knowledge is often difficult to find anywhere else.

In the 18 years that MPA News has been in publication, we have asked practitioners for lessons learned, and practices developed. We have published numerous tips on how to work more efficiently or effectively. But we have not asked you for the most fundamental, essential advice you have gained from your work.

We do make that request this month, and we'll continue to do so in future issues. We are asking practitioners:

What do you know now that you wish you had known when you got started in the MPA field?

Responses are below.

Make allies out of ocean users, instead of enemies

By **Tundi Agardy**

Tundi Agardy is founder and executive director of Sound Seas, which promotes marine conservation through science and sociology. Email: tundiagardy@earthlink.net

Looking back, I would have taken active steps to create allies out of ocean users, instead of enemies. We marine conservationists went down a different path, fueled by the knowledge that marine biodiversity was disappearing and ocean areas were becoming degraded. We claimed to have truth and the global commons on our side, and we were unconcerned about making enemies of the people who contested protectionist parks mostly because they were reacting to an “us and them” narrative. Many an MPA has faltered because of this disregard for the perceptions of the affected.

Had I known then what I know now, I would have endeavored to use two tactics of engagement:

1. For local stakeholders, I would have taken the time to explain the science behind establishing refuges and creating spillover, and would have worked with local users to allow as much multiple-use as possible, creating stewards in the process; and
 2. For large-scale vested interests like commercial fishers, multinational tourism operators, and national-level politicians, I would have taken the time to describe the myriad values coming from that place, to show why the investment of protection was worthwhile. I would have invested more time in this phase of MPA planning than in getting the science right, and I would have taken participatory planning seriously. We have come so far down this path we inadvertently set out on that there doesn't seem to be any turning back now, and our conservation work is harder than it ever was.
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Be prepared to face challenges and work hard, and to reset your enthusiasm

year after year

By Rodolfo Werner

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Although I have worked for a long time on MPAs in general, most of my experience in establishing them has been in Antarctica. For many years MPAs were not part of the agenda of the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). But in the last 10 years, and especially since 2012, MPAs have been one of the most important and complicated issues being discussed under the Convention.

In a consensus-based, international organization like CCAMLR, which involves 25 signatories, closing an area for spatial protection represents a great challenge. Different countries perceive the use of natural resources and areas differently when it comes to balancing protection and use. Thus, understanding and managing cultural differences is key. In the context of achieving international consensus, understanding global geopolitics can also be valuable, including on issues outside the particular geographic area you're looking to conserve.

Another thing that I have learned is that you should be prepared to deal with personal frustration. The establishment of MPAs can involve many years of hard work where you need to reset your conviction and enthusiasm year after year. These are things that you do not learn in textbooks.

Be flexible, patient, optimistic, and creative

By Fiona Gell

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I have worked for over 12 years as an MPA practitioner, after spending nearly 10 years on the academic side of fisheries science and MPA function. The Isle of Man now has a network of ten MPAs, protecting over 10% of our territorial sea (up from 0.13% in 2007) and work continues to develop this network. The fishing industry is highly engaged, including through the co-management of a Fisheries Management Zone within the Ramsey Marine Nature Reserve and actively participating in data collection for fisheries science.

These are the things I wish I had known from the start:

Actively engage all those with concerns. I understood the key role of fishermen but I didn't appreciate the importance of fully engaging everyone who could influence the process. It only takes one disgruntled person with a lot of time on their hands to derail years of progress.

Be flexible. The theory is all very well, but big wins can come from being flexible and pragmatic. Aspire to the textbook ideals, but if the chance comes to do something unexpected and beneficial, take it.

Be patient. Laying the groundwork – and building the evidence and the community support – for MPAs can be slow and frustrating, but it will come to fruition and the success will be longer-term if you have strong foundations. Persistence, resilience, and a very thick skin are invaluable.

Be optimistic. Social phase-shifts for conservation can happen. What is happening now in Isle of Man waters really seemed impossible 10 years ago.

Be creative. In the midst of the science, the stakeholder engagement, and getting policies and management in place, it can be easy to lose sight of what connects people to their marine environment. Innovative events that involve those who would never normally engage can have a big impact and lead to big leaps forward. We recently created a '[Fun Palace](#)', bringing arts and science together to explore Ramsey Marine Nature Reserve in a way that provided a new and creative public perspective on the MPA.

Once I accepted that theories of natural resource governance did not match

realities, the world made more sense

By Peter Jones

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Look up and get out there! I wish I had not been so focused on studies of theories and policies, and had gone out into the field sooner to speak to people involved in actual MPAs. In my early years I spent too much time reading, trying to understand realities through the lenses of different theories, and sometimes even trying to mold realities to match theories. It then started to occur to me that many theories were based on ideals about how the world *should* work, rather than realities about how it actually *does* work.

Once I accepted that many theories of natural resource governance did not match realities, and decided to focus on developing a systematic understanding of actual MPA case studies, the world started making much more sense. It is only then that I began to develop a clearer understanding of why some MPAs are effective and why some are not, leading to the development of my own empirical-methodological framework and grounded theoretical basis (www.mpag.info).

While it is important to gain an understanding of theories and develop research agendas, it is even more important to leave our office and speak to people related to MPAs who live in the real world, employing empirical-methodological frameworks to systematically undertake multiple case studies. The needs of marine conservation cannot be understood or addressed if we do not look up, get out there, and critically test theories.

Understand the dynamics of decision-making

By Patrick McConney

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As a young marine scientist, my academic training led me to believe that providing good data and information was largely a scientific challenge that, once overcome, would lead almost automatically to great decisions for implementing meaningful change for marine resources. I got a serious reality check in my first projects working on MPA management effectiveness. Some MPA boards based their decisions on perceptions, personal experience and anecdotes, or ignored stated plan objectives, even when reasonable data and decision-making criteria were available.

The lesson was that the path from data to decisions for action (or for avoiding action) was strewn with obstacles, looked like a maze, and consequently had a lot of dead ends to be discovered only after much wasted effort.

But you have to tackle decision-making in order to make progress. This is not only about fancy quantitative and visual Decision Support Systems, but also about basic institutions for decision-making – from everyday management through to policy level.

So what do we do?

Most importantly, despite what may be on paper in a plan, understand how the dynamics of decision-making can change over time, due to external influences and other variables. For the [Caribbean Protected Areas Gateway](#), we use the tagline “Linking data to better decisions” to focus our effort. We aim to provide a portal through which data on biodiversity, socioeconomics, and governance can be combined to improve decision-making with regard to protected areas. We will support this at the country level by building capacity to make better decisions, once we first understand the institutional dynamics of the multi-stakeholder decision-making system.

On listening, the virtue of failure, and passions outside of work

By Carol Bernthal

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Understand that what motivates people requires great communication and deep listening skills. It takes a lifetime of discovery and practice and is as diverse and fascinating as the ecosystems we study and protect. The most successful people are those who don't become stuck in one paradigm. They listen both with their minds and their hearts and can weave information together for good outcomes without becoming lost in the complexity.

I have also learned that failure is a great teacher. When your well-ordered theory of how the world works has just crumbled, it requires a brutally honest evaluation of why you failed. Don't be afraid to fail: just pick yourself up and go at it again. You are in the human race, not the race to perfection.

Last but not least, it really helps to have passions outside of work that take you to your happy place. If you don't have that core foundation, you aren't going to be able to last on the long road ahead.

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