



## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

*Find and engage people, partners and champions for coastal and marine resource protection*

### WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Stakeholder engagement has long been recognized as a core element of successful MPA design, planning, and ongoing management. **From a socio-economic perspective, effectively managed and broadly supported MPAs evolve to become natural assets that create a range of livelihood opportunities for coastal inhabitants, especially in the developing world.** At the same time, changes in marine resource governance sometimes result in a loss of traditional access or use rights for fishermen and other resource users. Such change can fuel social conflicts and engender resistance to management policies and regulatory frameworks, thereby creating barriers to success. For MPA managers the challenge is to regularly make high quality decisions while remaining responsive to the needs, interests and concerns of the public that may be affected by those decisions.

Advances in the field of public participation offer a range of participatory planning approaches, facilitative techniques and lessons

learned for managers seeking stakeholder involvement in natural resources management. **The benefits of stakeholder collaboration are well founded: increased transparency and accountability, better decision-making, enhanced social equity and justice, improved public/private sector relationships and creation of durable solutions to complex environmental challenges.** Yet no single approach or methodology works for every scenario. Managers must carefully assess, understand and adapt to the unique social and political landscape within which an MPA is embedded. Ultimately, any successful stakeholder engagement process accommodates a diversity of interested parties and produces outcomes that are widely acceptable and thus sustainable over the long-term.

## WHAT LESSONS MAY APPLY TO MY MARINE PROTECTED AREA?

**Recognize the value of collaboration.** Effective stakeholder engagement capitalizes on the public's desire to influence policy and management decisions that may affect them. When done well, collaboration helps address challenging issues in a way that is constructive, informed by a broad base of local knowledge, and allows managers and the public to significantly influence each other's thinking. Moreover, successful collaboration often results in strong partnerships between MPAs and key stakeholder groups such as tour operators, hoteliers, fishermen, water taxi associations and local chambers of commerce. To this end, a growing number of marine resource management authorities around the world are implementing collaborative models that regularly incorporate public interests into management planning. ([See Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Reef Advisory Committees and Local Marine Advisory Committees; Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Councils.](#))

**Identify relevant stakeholders and seek to understand their interests.** Stakeholder engagement processes must be designed well to achieve long-term success. A critical early step is the identification of affected or interested parties followed by an assessment of their hopes, concerns and perspectives relative to coastal and marine resource management. A situational assessment (sometimes called stakeholder analysis) reveals relevant issues and helps identify whose interests are at stake, what individuals or groups need to be consulted, where agreement and disagreement may lie and who may be most committed to a collaborative process. When establishing formal stakeholder bodies (e.g. steering committees, advisory groups or scientific councils), assessment results can inform development of a group "charter" or

"charge" that describes guiding principles of the collaborative effort, participant roles and responsibilities, decision-making protocols and ways to address conflict. ([See Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council Working Groups.](#))



*Stakeholders in the Bahamas discuss local MPA development.*

**Use a facilitator to lead participatory planning efforts.** It is becoming increasingly common for resource managers to hire a neutral third party to conduct objective stakeholder assessments and facilitate subsequent collaboration. This is especially true when management authorities have a vested interest in the outcome of a planning process or there is potential for conflict among competing stakeholder interests. In this type of setting neutral facilitators help managers organize and run meetings, create a problem-solving environment, mediate conflict and forge widespread agreement on challenging or contentious issues. Also remember that MPA managers, senior staff and supportive stakeholders benefit by learning and applying facilitation skills, whether as leaders engaging the public or as coaches and trainers focused on internal organizational development. ([See California Dungeness Crab Task Force.](#))

**Maintain open lines of communication with the public.** Effective communication is a

fundamental component of any public participation process. Managers can advance stakeholder collaboration by developing communication plans or strategies that ensure the public is properly informed, understands relevant issues and in turn has a platform to share their interests. Effective, honest and transparent communication also contributes to the development of good relationships. The International Association of Public Participation's [Core Values](#), [Public Participation Spectrum](#) and [Training Programs](#) provide easy-to-use tools that help managers understand the objectives of a participatory process, develop appropriate communication strategies and identify the management authority's commitment to the public.

**Become an active listener.** Inherent to any public participation process is the desire of stakeholders to know their points of view are being heard and considered by management authorities. Active listening builds shared understanding from a diversity of perspectives. In turn, stakeholders who feel understood and respected by management authorities generally become better listeners themselves. Such two-way communication benefits managers and the public alike, and commonly helps develop trust between all parties.

**Aim to build partnerships that realize mutual benefits.** Remember that marine resource users, while often times critical of marine management policies and programs, can in time become the strongest protectors and defenders of marine protected areas. Take the time to understand the needs and interests of these stakeholder groups as they relate to management and sustainable use of marine resources. Then develop programs that offer incentives, create mutual benefits for both resource user and manager, and can grow and be sustained over time. ([See Florida Keys](#)

[National Marine Sanctuary Blue Star Program; Saint Martin Nature Reserve.](#))

**Cultivate patience, leadership and resilience.** Designing and implementing successful stakeholder engagement processes is a challenging endeavor for any MPA manager. It can take a significant amount of time and resources to identify the appropriate tools and develop the right approach. Remember to stay focused on building durable agreements that realize widespread benefits among resources users and communities. Change is difficult and managers play a leadership role in helping stakeholders adjust to new circumstances through education, understanding and creative problem solving. Success takes time, perseverance and patience on the part of all parties.

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