

Science for Environment Policy

Marine Protected Areas: how to improve community support?

Plans for new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) need to consider social impacts alongside economic and environmental impacts, according to a recent study, which found that an MPA in the UK has increased some tensions within its local community. The researchers suggest that collaborative management could also help increase support for MPAs and reduce stakeholder conflict.

MPAs are areas of the sea where some human activity has been restricted, usually to protect marine habitats. Although their impacts on local people have been investigated before, few researchers have examined the social impacts of MPAs in temperate waters. The study highlights the need for MPA managers and national policymakers to consider social impacts when creating MPAs, by including social science expertise in the planning phase and focusing on social issues during the consultation process, alongside economic and environmental impact assessments.

To help address this gap, the researchers conducted an 'exploratory' study of stakeholder attitudes towards an MPA in Lyme Bay, south-west UK. The Lyme Bay MPA was created in 2008 to protect 206 km² of marine habitat from the damaging effects of fishing gear dragged along the seafloor. While many stakeholders supported the scheme, local fishers favoured a smaller 41.2 km² MPA.

The researchers interviewed 28 people, including mobile gear fishers (e.g. those using scallop dredges and bottom trawlers) and static gear fishers (e.g. those using pots and traps), as well as recreational users such as sea anglers, divers and people from charter boat and dive businesses. They identified a number of common themes from these interviews.

All stakeholder groups acknowledged the long-term benefits of the closure. Static gear fishers working inside the MPA appreciated the closure as it protected their own gear from mobile gear and allowed them to access areas previously dominated by mobile fishing gear. Sea anglers also noted the same protection, as well as an increase in fish numbers and diversity.

However, there were also concerns about the MPA. For example, mobile gear fishers now have to make longer trips to find suitable fishing grounds, raising safety fears and forcing them to spend more time away from their families. The mobile gear fishers also resented the loss of their traditional fishing rights. In contrast, recreational users thought that the closure was justified; before the MPA was introduced, they had felt that a small group of stakeholders had been damaging the environment used by all.

The MPA also increased direct tension and conflict between stakeholder groups. In particular, mobile gear and static gear fishers fishing outside the closed area were forced into closer proximity, leading to disputes over damaged gear. Tensions between recreational users and fishers had also increased. The recreational users felt they were not well represented in the consultation that led to the MPA's creation, as they were afraid to speak out in favour of the plans.

To reduce tensions between stakeholder groups, the researchers recommend adopting a collaborative management approach, whereby stakeholders take an active role alongside local authorities in managing the MPA. This could help to establish networks and rebuild trust between stakeholder groups.

The researchers caution that the study was a first step towards understanding the social impacts of marine closures, rather than an exhaustive study. They interviewed relatively few people, so stakeholder views were illustrative rather than representative, and they were not able to measure changing attitudes over time.



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Contact: caro4@pml.ac.uk

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