

Science for Environment Policy

Survey of attitudes towards marine protected areas gives mixed response

The views of organisations and industries affected by marine protected areas (MPAs) have been gathered by a new survey. 36 organisations from the UK and France responded to the survey, which asked about the perceived socio-economic and environmental impacts of multiple-use MPAs. Environmental NGOs, managing agencies and research centres gave a largely positive response, while fishers', shipping, and other industrial organisations perceived an overall negative impact on them. Gathering stakeholders' views on MPAs may help improve socioeconomic outcomes through informing the planning and management of these marine areas, the researchers say.

Numerous new MPAs have been designated in European waters in recent years, as part of the Natura 2000 network under EU Habitats and Birds Directives, requirements from the [OSPAR commission and national legislations](#). The marine conservation strategies of England and France aim to create an MPA network of 27.1% and 20% of their respective territorial waters — proportions which are much above the international targets set by the Convention on Biological Diversity. These areas are designed to benefit marine ecosystems, but they also have potential socio-economic implications. Multiple-use MPAs take into account business and leisure interests by allowing regulated, sustainable activities to take place, as opposed to the more strict restrictions in no-take MPAs, also known as marine reserves.

The survey, which was part of the Protected Area Network Across the Channel Ecosystem project (PANACHE), was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (INTERREG). The survey was delivered to 90 different organisations in the UK and France, all of which were identified to be possibly affected by multi-use MPAs, either positively or negatively. Each organisation fell into one of 20 categories of stakeholders from local residents and landowners, to members of the shipping industry and scientific bodies.

As expected, environmental charities and research centres responded largely positively, as did some local councils, managing organisations and nature conservation bodies. However, fishers', shipping, aggregate industries and recreational businesses perceived themselves to be negatively affected by the MPAs. Catering businesses, the energy industry, landowners, some tourism boards and some tour operators gave a neutral response, feeling that MPAs do not greatly affect them. This is somewhat surprising, as the benefits to recreation and tourism are often emphasised as an important advantage of MPAs. The study's authors suggest this may be due to a lack of awareness of the potential tourism benefits of MPAs, for example, or to the lack of clarity regarding which particular activities MPAs do or do not regulate.

The most surprising result was that 30% of the respondents — including all industrial and fishers' organisations — said they did not believe that multiple-use MPAs provided any environmental benefits. This figure is likely to be conditioned by some of these organisations' perception of being negatively affected by multi-use MPAs, leading the authors to suggest that the response may have been put down in protest to some extent.

More evidence-based, targeted communication from those involved in the planning, designation and management of MPAs may help to improve the perceptions and conform more realistic expectations of interest groups. The researchers add that the specific data regarding individual organisations generated by this type of survey can be of use to planners and managers, and can help to ensure that engagement, outreach and education programmes are effective. Including the views of priority stakeholders at all stages of MPA designation processes is crucial for the success of marine conservation initiatives.



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