

3.0 Core Issues

The central goal of this effort was to assess a set of representative MPA planning processes to:

- Determine the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement
- Identify effective process planning and management elements
- Make recommendations to improve future such efforts.

The MPA Center sought information on stakeholder perspectives on a series of core issues related to these goals, including the following (drawn from the Statement of Work):

- The clarity and attainability of the conservation goals and objectives for the proposed MPA(s)
- The clarity of the policy and legal framework and the programmatic mandates within which the MPA planning processes were conducted
- The adequacy of the timeline from initial scoping to final decisions
- The adequacy of programmatic resources devoted to the planning process
- The impact, role, and adequacy of scientific information in informing decision making and resolving conflicts about site design, location and purpose(s)
- The adequacy, utility and clarity of technical information and decision support tools provided to the public
- The degree to which the perspectives of important stakeholder groups were adequately represented throughout the process
- The degree to which input from various stakeholder or user groups was weighed in making the final decisions on MPA design
- The influence of the ‘process design’ on its ultimate outcome, including the role of facilitators
- The degree to which the final MPA configuration met the stated programmatic conservation goals of the planning exercise
- Ways to improve meaningful stakeholder participation in MPA planning processes

It is clear that stakeholder perceptions alone do not provide a complete picture of the ultimate success (itself a difficult term to define) of a designation effort. Nevertheless, any participatory process that does not foster the involvement of key stakeholders is not likely to achieve its stated aims. In addition, the variety of viewpoints inherent in a broad cross section of stakeholders is a fruitful source of observations and insights for analysis and evaluation. The project’s primary focus on stakeholder perceptions should therefore be seen as a basis for analysis rather than as an explicit criterion of process adequacy or success.

In conjunction with project managers, investigators expanded the issues identified in the Statement of Work into a longer list of questions that fell into four bundles related to:

- Planning and design of stakeholder and MPA designation processes,
- How convenors, facilitators, agency managers, and others managed the process itself,
- Decision making about designation and how that action related to the stakeholder process, and
- Evaluation of the stakeholder process as well whether the MPA designation includes a means to monitor the MPA and evaluate effectiveness in meeting its objectives over time.

3.1 Setting the stage: Process design

Issues related to the initial process design stages of the case studies included:

- The role of clear goals and objectives, as well as interim benchmarks or milestones
- The potential for confusion stemming from the often different sets of goals and objectives associated with enabling legislation, the individual MPA itself, and the process used to establish the MPA
- The function of any linkages established among these different sets of goals and objectives
- When in the designation process stakeholder participation was solicited
- The presence and results of actions to identify constituent groups, their perspectives, their relative influence, and their relationships to the set of goals and objectives
- The degree to which stakeholder representatives reflected their broader constituencies, including those directly affected by potential decisions
- Similarities and differences in how stakeholders viewed and understood the process
- The roles science and scientists, both natural and social, played
- The degree to which the general public was involved
- The presence and effect of any equity or environmental justice issues.

3.2 Working with stakeholders: Process management

Issues involved in the stakeholder process itself included:

- The identification and/or use of best practices for critical elements of the designation process
- The presence and function of explicit groundrules
- The function of leadership of different kinds
- The use and effectiveness of decision support tools (e.g., maps, interactive GIS)
- The influence of past history on the interactions of stakeholder groups
- The nature and extent of ongoing communication between stakeholder representatives and their constituents
- Whether resources available to constituents affected the scientific advice they were able to provide
- The way science was solicited and used in the process
- Methods used to ensure all participants had a common knowledge base
- Methods for eliciting needed information from different stakeholder groups
- The influence of external advocacy campaigns.

3.3 Decision making: What happens after stakeholders have their say?

Issues involved in making and implementing decisions included:

- The nature of the larger decision-making process and its relationships to local and regional processes
- Degree to which the larger decision process was understood by stakeholder groups
- The role played by comments from those outside the stakeholder process
- The influence of agency roles and relationships, as well as the larger political context, on decision making
- Methods by which agencies retain discretion on action as it proceeds through administrative steps.

3.4 Evaluation: Did the process accomplish its objectives?

Issues involved in determining whether reserves are effective included:

- The role of evaluation in determining if an MPA has met its objectives
- Meaningful ways to identify lessons that link process and fundamental purpose
- How monitoring was dealt with during stakeholder discussions

- Whether gathering scientific information was an objective of the MPA
- Whether an explicit monitoring plan was included in the MPA design
- Who was given the responsibility for monitoring
- Whether monitoring is linked to an adaptive management plan.