



Comment

Counterpoint to Obura

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In my reading of David Obura's argument for marine protected area (MPA) effectiveness he calls for the crafting of more precise management objectives and determination of the spatial extent subject to management. This, Obura argues, will lead to better agreements and compromise among stakeholders. In short, Obura links lack of MPA effectiveness to the lack or imprecise management objectives. Yet, he cautions against confusing the need for clear objectives with creating static management mechanisms. Obura illustrates his argument with examples of overtime management adaptations that appropriately accommodated new biological, ecological criteria, or local fishers' demands and concerns.

It is hard to disagree with Obura's general argument. What is harder however, is to agree on the best process to arrive to clearly defined management objectives with appropriate updating and refinement.

Situating Obura's arguments within a complex adaptive systems framework is useful because marine system (including the social) dynamics are characterized for their non-linearity and complex feedback loops (Wilson, 2006). In this light, it becomes problematic to precisely understand how and what drivers and causal relationships are at work at any given moment in time. Thus, Obura's call for precise management objectives together with the need for adaptation cannot be outright assumed as compatible with each other, unless one pays attention to the institutions governing the MPA. That is, the rules-in-use determining who is allowed to be part of such process of devising and updating management objectives, what decisions can be taken, and the outcomes that can be imagined, among other issues.

In the context of the governance of complex adaptive systems like MPAs, understanding the governance arrangements in place

are central in being able to assert and qualify Obura's argument regarding MPA effectiveness. Yet, it is often implicitly assumed that the identification of the problem of management and thus, the goal of management is a straightforward endeavour.

The literature on resource governance is abundantly clear that it is often challenging for resource users to agree on what the resource use problem is, what the causes are, and how best to address the issue (Ostrom, 1990). Addressing these difficulties often requires developing carefully crafted processes where stakeholders can increase the likelihood of developing a common understanding of the problem and agree on the best way to address it. They also need to feel their investment on participating in these processes will have some tangible effect on the management of the MPA.

In sum, I argue that Obura's call for clear management objectives can become more meaningful when paired with well-suited adaptive management processes. Careful systematic attention to governance processes are central towards better understanding the vast variation of management effectiveness we observe across MPAs (Gill *et al.*, 2017).

References

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