



## Introduction: An empirical framework for deconstructing the realities of governing marine protected areas



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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 9 February 2013

#### Keywords:

Governance analysis  
Empirical framework  
Marine protected areas  
Co-management

### ABSTRACT

Debates surrounding governance strategies for marine protected areas (MPAs) have to date largely focused on top-down, bottom-up or market-based approaches. Whilst co-management approaches for governing MPAs are widely accepted as a way forward for combining these three strategies, many interpretations of this concept exist and it is applied in many different ways in MPAs in different contexts. This study aimed to explore governance through a case-study approach based on a specifically developed empirical framework – the marine protected area governance (MPAG) analysis framework – to increase understanding of how to combine the three governance approaches. A dialogue with MPA practitioners in 20 case studies helped shape the MPAG analysis framework as it developed, and an international workshop was held on ‘Governing MPAs’, bringing the practitioners together to compare results and further develop the framework. This paper provides an overview of the topic and research methodology and briefly introduces the case studies further explored in this special issue.

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### Overview of the marine protected area governance (MPAG) project and its theoretical background

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines a marine protected area (MPA) as “a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” [1]. Whilst the international community continues to push for protected area targets, including the Convention on Biological Diversity’s target for 10% of marine areas under national jurisdiction to be protected by the year 2020, a wider and highly important question remains as to whether MPAs are effective in achieving their conservation objectives, and if not, whether and how this failure is related to the way(s) in which they are governed.

Debates on the merits and downfalls of different approaches to governance have evolved with civilisation, and many influential thinkers have put forward arguments concerning the relative importance of top-down (regulation by the state), bottom-up (community-based), and market (economic incentives) approaches. There is a vast literature on the relative merits of these approaches and many definitions of governance. Indeed, the word ‘governance’ is derived from Plato’s use of the Greek verb ‘to steer’ (The Republic, 360 BC),

and another way to consider these debates is to examine how different ways of steering human affairs (Table 1) can be combined in order to achieve strategic societal objectives. For the purposes of this project, the following definition of governance was thereby considered most appropriate: “steering human behaviour through combinations of people, state and market incentives in order to achieve strategic objectives”. This definition is consistent with the growing recognition in governance debates that there is a need to move beyond ideological arguments as to which approach is ‘right’ or ‘best’, and instead, develop governance models, frameworks and approaches that combine the steering role of states, markets and people [2].

Many social and political scientists have taken these debates forward through studies of natural resource governance approaches. However, many governance analyses, particularly those from a common-pool resource (CPR) perspective, drawing on neo-institutional theories, remain primarily focused on the role of people and civil society in self-organising social-ecological systems e.g. Ostrom [3], and resistant to the potential role of some degree and form of state coordination, control and/or regulation. This is consistent with Kjær’s [4] observation that whilst governance analyses should consider the role of the government and state steer, since the 1980s governance has increasingly been considered by many analysts as being distinct from government in its focus on people and civil society. The research upon which this paper is based aims to move these debates forward through analyses of MPA case studies that are

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**Table 1**  
Three perspectives on sources of governance steer.

Steer type	Decisions taken by	Characteristics
State steer	Governments and regulatory agencies	Top-down decisions by state through laws and regulations, drawing on expert advice
Market steer	Markets and economic systems	Decisions on basis of economic rationality through markets and/or implemented through economic incentives, including property rights
People steer	Civil society: people, social networks and related organisations	Bottom-up decisions through deliberations amongst individuals, community/non-governmental organisations and social/family networks

**Table 2**  
MPAG analytical framework: incentive categories [2].

Incentive category	Definition	Relevant governance mode
Economic	Using economic and property rights approaches to promote the fulfilment of MPA objectives.	Market-based
Interpretative	Promoting awareness of the conservation features of the MPA, the related objectives for conserving them and the policies for achieving these objectives, and promoting support for related measures.	Supporting all three approaches
Knowledge	Respecting and promoting the use of different sources of knowledge (local/traditional and expert/scientific) to better inform MPA decisions.	Supporting all three approaches
Legal	Establishment and enforcement of relevant laws, regulations etc. as a source of 'state steer' to promote compliance with decisions and thereby the achievement of MPA obligations	Top-down (state steer)
Participative	Providing for users, communities and other interest groups to participate in and influence MPA decision-making that may potentially affect them in order to promote their 'ownership' of the MPA and thereby their potential to cooperate in the implementation of decisions.	Bottom-up (people steer)

based less on theories and underpinning ideals, and more on the realities of such case studies, including an acceptance of the potential contribution of the state towards addressing the many challenges raised by MPAs in effectively achieving strategic conservation objectives [5].

Collaborative management (hereafter co-management) is a common concept or narrative that is employed in natural resource and protected area governance, whereby local communities and the state work on a partnership basis to sustainably manage natural resource use and/or conserve biodiversity, potentially involving all three of the governance approaches listed above. However, co-management arguably simply serves as a new framing device as to the relative emphasis that should be placed on the three approaches, rather than representing an answer to these debates.

MPAs are an important focus for debates concerning how these different approaches can be combined in co-management. It is widely accepted that co-managing MPAs is the way forward, but there are many different interpretations of this concept and it is applied in many different ways amongst MPAs in different contexts. One way of considering the challenges of co-managing MPAs is to consider the question: what does the recommendation that the "design and management of MPAs must be both top-down and bottom-up" [6] actually mean in practice?

The research upon which this paper draws was conceived to address this question by examining how different governance approaches are combined, through a detailed analysis of a range of MPA case studies. In examining the relative roles of top-down, bottom-up and market approaches to governance in these case studies, this project sought to explore the proposition that these approaches are applicable to different challenges in different contexts, and hence a *combination* of governance approaches is necessary to effectively achieve strategic conservation objectives.

The initial proposal for this project was circulated amongst the membership of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), and a pre-conference workshop was held at the

second International Marine Protected Area Congress (IMPAC2) in Washington, DC in May 2009. Prior to the workshop, a governance analysis framework was developed as a proposal for analysing the case studies. This framework (discussed in more detail below) was subsequently refined, both in the light of discussions at the workshop and of feedback received from international MPA practitioners. During 2009–2010, project participants utilised the framework to analyse governance approaches in their case study MPAs, and in October 2010 a case study workshop was held in Lošinj, Croatia, hosted by the Blue World Institute and supported by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This workshop focused on case study presentations based on applying the analytical framework, and a resulting UNEP technical report based on these analyses was published in 2011 [2].

### The MPA governance empirical framework

This study was developed as a means of systematically analysing and comparing MPA governance in a representative range of case studies from around the world, with a view to identifying 'good practice' and assessing its transferability to other MPAs in comparable contexts. A framework for analysing MPA governance was initially developed by the first author, subject to subsequent refinements in discussion with the other authors, coupled with a review of related literature, including MPA case studies. The framework was further refined and adapted through discussions with MPAG project participants, as described above. The MPA governance analysis framework represents a realist institutional analysis approach. It is realist in that it is designed to collect information and empirically examine case studies in different contexts. It is institutional in that it builds on neo-institutional theories and case studies. Ostrom [7] broadly defines institutions as "prescriptions that humans use to organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions, including those within

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