

Limited awareness by recreation users' of French marine protected area: is there a flip side to the soft management approach?

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Introduction

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are generally considered an important tool for conservation of marine biodiversity, habitats and various ecosystem services, including those related to recreation use. Rees et al. (2015) noted that understanding and engaging with MPA recreation users can help garner support and facilitates more effective management.

MPAs are a relatively new addition to the protected area network in France (Deboudt, Meur-Férec and Morel, 2015). French MPAs adopt a soft management approach, meaning generally open public access and minimal regulations, for social equity reasons. Furthermore, French protected area management (including MPAs) has an emphasis on social engagement for collective decision making (Folco and Germain, 2015). Through an interdisciplinary approach (geography, sociology and environmental psychology), the aim of our study was to understand the awareness of recreation stakeholders, and their relationship with MPAs as a relatively recent, soft management, phenomenon in France.

Method

Data was gathered using an onsite survey of recreation users in French MPAs. The study included a total of seven recreation activities and ten French MPA and coastal protected sites (Figure). Beside demographic questions, the survey involved variables relating to how the MPA were used by the respondent included four aspects: their knowledge of MPA presence and local management, their willingness to engage with local MPA management, their personal support for more environmental regulation in the MPA and the importance of the MPA for participating in their particular recreational activity. Responses to questions were indicated using 5 point Likert scales.

Results and discussion

In total, 1000 questionnaires were collected using face-to-face interviews in the field, between April and November 2016.

Recreation types and demographics

Most of respondents were male (74%) and lived locally in the area where they were surveyed (55.2%) or owned a holiday home in the area (10.6%). About one third were visiting the area as tourists (34.2%). Results showed significant statistical relationships between the type of recreation activity and demographic variables (gender, age, status of residence, social status, region of practice).

Knowledge of MPA presence and management

Half of the respondents (51.8 %) had a low level of knowledge, or no knowledge about the MPA presence and management in locations they accessed for recreation. This lack of knowledge about the MPAs also indicates a lack of knowledge about the MPA management objectives (particularly conservation). This lack of knowledge could lead to difficulties with fostering community support for, and engagement in, MPA management (Hastings & Ryan, 2017).

Declared importance to use a MPA

The generally low perceived importance of French MPAs as a place for recreation (45.7 %) may also relate to minimal regulations. It seems that minimal regulation means the presence or absence of MPAs in France make little difference to recreation users. Most users did not clearly perceive benefits from the presence of the MPA either in terms of conservation and preservation of landscapes, or in terms of maintaining and safeguarding sites for their own use.

Personal acceptance of more regulation for environmental reasons

Most respondents (63%) supported the introduction of additional MPA regulations to some degree. This result seems to be a positive indicator of concern for the preservation of the marine and coastal environment. This finding appears to counter the concerns of French MPA managers that recreation users are a general threat to conservation objectives. Soft management is often generally accepted by recreation users because it is less likely to infringe on public use.

Willingness to engage in local MPA management:

Just over half of all respondents (53%) indicated a lack of willingness (37%) or show only mild interest (16.4%) in terms of engagement with the MPA management process. This lack of interest by recreation users who are a key stakeholder group presents a significant challenge for French MPA managers for whom recreation is a priority issue (Folco and Germain, 2015). The minimal approach to French MPA regulation intended to ensure minimal social impacts appears to also minimize public awareness of, and interest in, MPAs and subsequently, stymies participative governance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the complexity of engaging with recreation users as a stakeholder group for marine protected area in a country where these protected areas are a relatively recent concept superimposed on well-established and historically settled human uses. It

seems that soft management of MPAs to avoid impinging on recreation access and public liberties is also associated with an overall low visibility of MPAs in France.

Should we conclude that there is a need for more regulation, despite concerns about impinging on liberties in French MPAs? It is important to note that, past examples involving stronger regulatory management based, in part, on the exclusion of humans from protected areas were not supported by local people and also failed to meet the management objectives. Perhaps the solution lies in a hybrid approach to management between top-down management (administrative and regulatory) and participatory governance as proposed by Mathevet and Godet (2015). Stronger regulation could increase the visibility of protected areas, increase understanding, support and engagement with MPAs for users. This would also require active engagement through more effective communication including the presence of managers on site to interact with the public to allow more visible management.

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