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Lessons Learned from Australia's Stakeholder Engagement Efforts for MPA Planning.

Jon Day shares key lessons learned from stakeholder engagement efforts during the Representative Areas Program in the Great Barrier Reef, which was a key part of the comprehensive rezoning of the entire Marine Park between 1999 and 2003. As a result of this planning process, the total area of no-take zones increased from less than 5% to over one-third of the Marine Park, highlighting in large part the importance of effectively engaging stakeholders. Some of this accrued wisdom includes:

- Simplify – in layman's terms – technical concepts into short, shareable documents (e.g. information sheets) to ensure stakeholders understand key details and concepts;
- Communicate clearly the objective(s) of the planning process;
- Tailor your key messages for different target audiences (take a strategic approach);
- If possible, avoid large, public meetings – especially in places where alcohol is served – as the “noisy minority” will drown out the “silent majority”;
- “Whenever issues affecting a stakeholder's livelihood are discussed, it is critical that a young/naïve/inexperienced officer does not represent the agency. [Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority] used officers who really knew the issues, e.g., an ex-fisheries manager who understood the concerns of all types of fishers and knew how to talk with them; an ex-tourism employee knew what was important for tourist operators, etc”;
- A trained media spokesperson is ideal to navigate the media landscape: the media can be both a friend or a foe, so have clear, concise messages prepared to present your key points and counter hearsay;
- Use ‘champions’ (e.g. high profile athletes or celebrities) to endorse the planning process or deliver key messages.
- Do not raise false expectations with stakeholders or politicians as to the likely outcomes or timelines, and do not promise anything that you may not be able to deliver;
- Politicians are usually more interested in what the wider community thinks than just those who send written submissions.
- Don't ignore those stakeholders who choose to remain silent; telephone polling of the wider public can determine the real level of public understanding and support;
- Refute incorrect information as soon as possible;
- Political buy-in is essential: keep a list of people you have engaged and when, so you can show politicians which of their constituents you have worked with;
- Remind stakeholders that it is the quality of comments, not the quantity, that will affect decision-making;
- Be able to show stakeholders and decision-makers that public comments do make a difference;
- Open-ended survey questions are difficult to code and quantify, so use other methods where possible;
- “It is easier to ask specific questions about a map with areas/blocks pre-marked and numbered, than have to code individually submitted maps”;
- If you're doing your engagement properly, be prepared to receive more responses than you expected.

This is a summary of:
Effective public participation is fundamental for marine conservation – lessons from a large scale MPA

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