

MPAs improve general management, Marine Reserves ensure conservation.

The June 'MPA Perspective' by Tundi Agardy is a carefully-argued and clearly sincere attempt to warn us about the problems that might arise if we set dangerous targets and adopt inflexible stances. Fortunately a little more attention to the basic assumptions shows that there is really no problem at all, other than that produced by confusing different methods and aims.

Ms Agardy is absolutely correct when she states that MPAs cannot have a single definition or a single model; that MPAs can have a wide range of objectives and benefits; that they must be site specific and hence flexible. There is only one fault in her argument, if it is a fault. She is not distinguishing between MPAs and marine reserves. Her understanding of the nature and purpose MPAs is quite acceptable to reasonable people. But, except in timing, this equates MPAs with general marine planning and management. In her terms, MPAs are pieces of the sea that we are at present giving more and better attention. There is nothing wrong with that. The sea is very large, we are very busy and cannot do everything at once. If we wish to label as MPAs the areas where we can now arrange more and better regulations, who can complain?

Such actions will spread and will improve. Our capacity and willingness to plan and manage areas of the sea will steadily increase. The need to label as MPAs the pieces where some concerted effort is being made will slowly diminish as more and more people accept that the sea, like the land, needs careful planning and management.

MPAs are about total management and its improvement. MPAs often have conservation as one of the objectives, but are more likely have some particular aspects of conservation as defined aims that are seen to be locally important - along with many other worthy aims. This approach is important, useful and, indeed, inevitable.

But none of this alters the argument for fully-protected marine reserves. They are not concerned with general management as such. They aim to preserve (or restore) the full range of marine life and habitats in each region. This aim does fit into sensible marine management, but it will not wait for any particular level of such management. Fully-protected reserves are needed now, and targets are entirely appropriate. How much more general management is needed at present in any particular area is always arguable, and the answer will keep changing. But we must keep our options open and this means maintaining the basic components – especially the living components. This should not wait for problems to occur, it should not list the species or threats, it should be done on principle. It is perfectly reasonable to state that we need to set up a representative and sustainable network of marine reserves as soon as possible, and that 'sustainable' implies a target. This is entirely compatible with the steady development of flexibly-planned MPAs with a wide range of objectives. Just as MPAs will help with many aspects of conservation, fully-protected marine reserves will help with many aspects of general marine management. We do not need to worry about the fact that these are two different aims and that the methods for producing them will also be different.

We need MPAs where everything is carefully managed and we need marine reserves where the only management is to ensure things are left as undisturbed as possible. We do not need targets and defined stances on MPAs – just continuous adoption and improvement. We urgently need marine reserves with full protection (not flexible) and minimum targets so as to produce ecologically viable reserves and a sustainable system.

The nomenclature is not important, but the separation of the ideas is crucial. If you wish to call your MPA a multi-zoned and multi-use Marine Park and the fully-protected no-take areas Sanctuary Zones within the Park, I can see no objection - provided you make sure you get enough fully-protected areas. I note with great pleasure that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, has just announced its intention of substantially increasing the amount of ‘Green Zones’ (no-take areas) in the Park. The present amount is 4.5%.

In many countries it is argued that no-take marine reserves will provide benefits for fisheries, but the Australian state of Victoria has just passed into law a system of Marine National Parks (all no-take) entirely on the need for conservation. As a biologist I think it is highly likely that no-take areas will assist fisheries, but I also feel this is not predictable in any particular case. So it should not be used as an aim. This does not matter, the conservation argument for fully-protected areas is predicable and undeniable, the fisheries and other socio-economic benefits will be bonuses (as we have seen repeatedly in New Zealand).