

Speaking for ourselves

Some reflections on the first International Marine Protected Area Congress, and the need for a human perspective

The participants of the first International Marine Protected Area Congress (IMPAC 1), held in Geelong, Australia from 23 to 28 October 2005, came from every corner of our earth. All engaged in a wide range of issues affecting the protection of marine protected areas (MPAs). All were committed, and willing, to face the daunting challenges of making sure that all forms of marine life will continue to exist in its purest and most natural forms for future years.

Administratively, the organizers were determined to produce a successful and productive conference, the outcomes of which are to be used for international advocacy work and give direction to ongoing research and development endeavours. The Congress was a genuine effort to intelligently engage with the challenges of making MPAs successful, given current global challenges.

The five focus themes of the Congress enabled participants to choose their particular area of interest. The themes were Shared Stewardship; Sustainability–Resilience; Ecosystems; Developing MPA Networks; and Effective Management. To ensure integration of these themes, the organizers also arranged sessions where crosscutting issues could be explored and analyzed. This was a constructive effort to ensure that major challenges were not engaged without the broader context and that ‘people’, correctly, were seen to be part of the context.

But where were the voices of the actual local communities whose livelihoods depend on the very marine parks that are intended for conservation? Are we conserving marine life for researchers, scientists, onlookers and tourists to come and marvel at? No. We must take care that

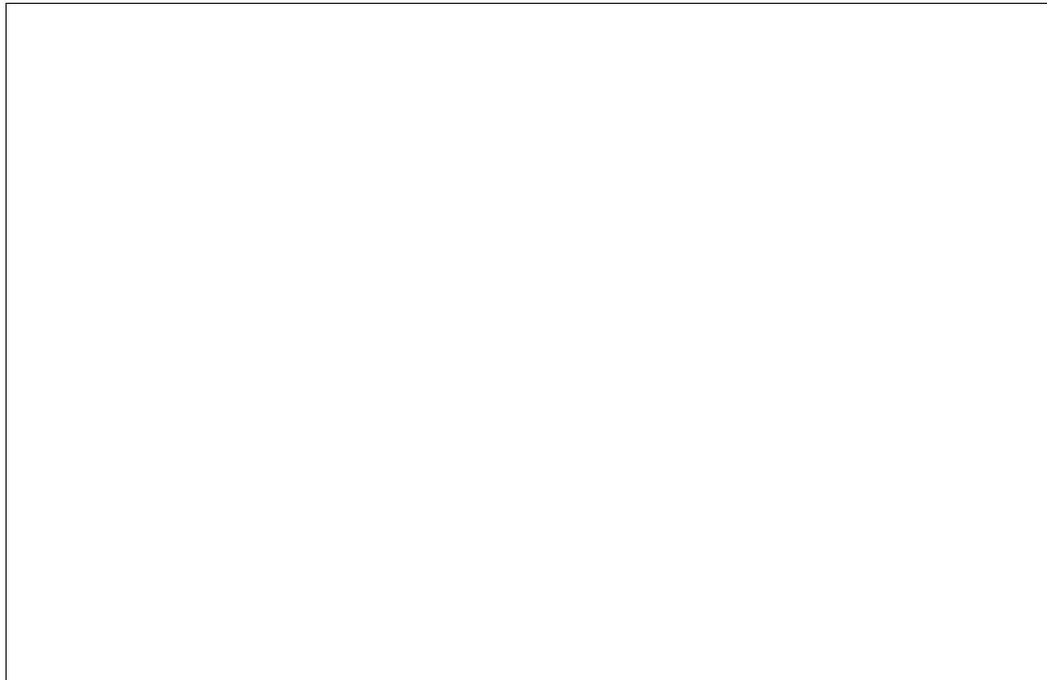
coastal areas are maintained so that all living forms can continue to live interactively with them in the future. People in communities that live interdependently with marine life can best speak about conserving coastal and marine life and their own livelihoods. We must recognize, too, that local communities can informatively reflect on the real human value of the protection of marine living resources, and the challenges that come with this task. That some champion their cause, albeit welcomed, does not replace the call: “We can speak for ourselves”!

It was evident that the Congress participants looked at marine parks through the eyes of researchers and scientists who have environmental protection as their first priority. Progressive social scientists, in contrast, look at life from a human perspective first. Yet both have the interest of improving and protecting life forms with dignity and respect, for their sustainable future existence. While IMPAC1 made a significant contribution toward the involvement of local and indigenous communities in the marine parks process, it did so primarily from a marine science and environmental perspective.

The time has long arrived for science and all knowledge systems to be integrated—not as separate entities brought together, but as different living forms that interactively share the same living environment.

Integration needed

If we are to meet the Millennium Development Goals, then such an integration is becoming all the more urgent. In communities, we confront the degradation of peoples’ rights and human dignity. We fight poverty and economic



exploitation. We challenge the greedy, who exploit human and natural 'life'. The complexities of human and political conflicts, economic greed and environmental/marine degradation must be engaged with simultaneously, so that a universal programme can be developed to ensure that all forms of natural life (humans, plants and animals) can co-exist sustainably in future. Surely democratic practice calls for this!

We look forward to IMPAC2 to make this important shift. 

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