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Tundi's Take | EBM: Time to stop talking and start doing

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It has been a decade or more since EBM came into the vernacular. In the interim, paeans to EBM have appeared in project proposals, annual reports, government reviews, student writings, and, with great periodicity and predictability, in MEAM as well.

We have become very good at talking about EBM. Sadly, we're less good at demonstrating how it is done. Even small steps in the direction of EBM (remember, EBM is a journey, not a destination) have been taken haltingly: sometimes with two steps forward, one step back; sometimes with two steps forward, two steps back; and sometimes with no real steps taken at all.

What is constraining us from moving towards EBM, which most everyone agrees is necessary? It is certainly not lack of ambition nor a paucity of information. In fact, we have so much information in this age - everything is at our fingertips, a Google search away. But maybe that information is not being put to its best use (and a cynic might say that perhaps the information is being used in nefarious ways). We can propose to do the right thing in infinite detail, and we are able to sell EBM well. But doing it is another matter.

Too much information = No action?

Here's an unpopular idea: it may be that the huge amount of information available to all of us today also has the undesirable effect, paradoxically, of clouding our thinking. It seems ever more difficult to establish priorities when the realm of what needs to be addressed in management and the realm of actors to be engaged get ever bigger. More information on a variety of pressures may make it more difficult to pinpoint the most important threats that need to be addressed. And bigger and bigger target areas for management - areas that have grown in size and scope thanks to a commitment to EBM - mean that difficult choices in terms of priority areas or optimal management actions may be harder to elaborate.

Have we created a monster by highlighting the interconnections between ecosystems and between nature and humanity? Have we been rendered impotent by our highlighting that marine management is a complex problem that requires a complex solution? I think not.

To implement EBM, reward courage

But we have, unfortunately, rewarded those who talk and write about EBM more than those who have struggled to make it a reality. For putting EBM into practice requires not only knowledge, but also bravery. We do not talk about the implications of EBM much, beyond suggesting ways it will increase the efficacy of management. Yet inevitably there will be those who suffer from EBM actually being implemented. And sometimes those who stand most to lose are those in power or those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

So we go on planning. We amass information, we ask the right questions, we engage the stakeholders, and we develop scenarios that foretell alternative futures. Precious few of us are willing to leave the comfort and safety of planning, to actually draw lines on maps, impose regulations, enforce the law, and stay committed to watching to see how well nature and users respond.

A decade or two on, EBM is still a nice idea, unsullied by the realities of how difficult, painful, and sloppy it is to change human behavior.

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