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## Tundi's Take: The most underrepresented voice in MSP

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My last [Dispatches from the Field, from the sleepy town of Olhao, Portugal](#) got me thinking about participatory planning, democratic decisions for allocating use, and fair representation in decision-making. EBM and MSP guidance manuals and trainings almost always cover the need to identify stakeholders and get their input – precursors to broad-based, meaningful participation in planning processes. But having everyone at the table isn't necessarily a recipe for broad-based, meaningful participation.

In most MSP processes I've witnessed, those with the most influence over allocation decisions are those with the loudest voices. Don't picture shouting matches – though I've seen that too. No, the loudest voices – those that are heard – are the ones that are best able to deliver their message. Sometimes, they are the individuals best trained in communications, other times the most assertive negotiators, and often those backed by strong, well-financed institutions. The meek shall not inherit the ocean world...

So does it matter, you might ask, if the fringe elements of society – those using outdated, traditional (and inefficient, I might add) methods to fish or those attached to ancient, sacred ocean places, lose their voice? In a world of 6 billion hungry people and a lot of money to be made in allocating ocean use to well-run, profit-making industries, does this matter?

### Nature must be given a voice

Well, let's look at what voices are least-heard in ocean planning. Traditional users, often invited to planning processes, have perhaps the strongest stake in maintaining ocean health – their food security, livelihoods, and societies are often intimately tied to healthy marine systems. But while these interests are commonly 'represented' in planning processes, their representatives are often handicapped by a lack of tools (or access to tools) for meaningful participation. Traditional users may have trouble accessing databases on the value of their ocean use, if such databases exist, and they almost always lack the sophisticated tools that transform such data into hard-hitting graphics or hard-edged negotiating points. And, commonly, those who represent these communities are not well versed in negotiation tactics, dampening the volume of their voices in the horse-trading that marks most MSP processes. But we must remember, while the revenues generated from traditional use may pale in comparison to industrial uses, collectively a large proportion of human society is directly dependent on healthy oceans for food security, livelihoods, and well-being.

But we've covered this topic before and explored how to improve participation in planning processes (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)). So now I'd like to throw out another idea. That is: perhaps the most under-represented interest in MSP – the one with the weakest voice – is nature itself.

I get it. At this point most of you serious EBM practitioners will stop reading. But bear with me for one more moment. We ignore giving nature a voice at our own peril – it will come back to haunt us. Even the richest, most powerful corporations face a risky future if planning decisions are made without considering what nature needs to survive. Nature must be represented in MSP and ocean use decisions. It must be given a stronger voice.

### Planning for sustainability protects us all

The MSP processes we see unfolding around the world right now are treating conservation as a special interest – and a very weak one at that. Environmental organizations are given a seat at the table, but considerations of sustainability are only given passing notice. Once the token representative for nature has been heard, the discussions can get on to serious business – ways to pack in as many profitable uses into the ocean space as possible. Old uses, traditional uses, conservation-related non-use can only remain if they can be shown to be as profitable as emerging and profit-making industrial uses.

There are ethical reasons – including responsibility to future generations – why giving nature a voice is a moral imperative. But the arguments for not destroying nature through development are not very convincing to everyone, I'm afraid. What might be more convincing is the prospect of countries and companies losing all their blue growth investments as marine ecosystems unravel from multiple pressures that undermine their functioning and resilience. And most alarming of all is the prospect of a future with few new options – as the opportunities that conservation-based planning could have provided are gone due to the loud calls for aggressive development strategies for unlocking the ocean's 'blue growth potential'.

### Another voice of concern about European maritime policy

For another voice of concern about European maritime policy "veering off course towards an integrated-use model of maritime spatial planning in which ecosystem protection/restoration ... is demoted to just another sectoral priority, with trade-offs consistently steered towards economic development," read a recent [blog on OpenChannels.org](#) by Peter J. S. Jones, senior lecturer in the Department of Geography at University College London.

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