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“If the fishers are having coffee, you drink coffee with them”: MSP in St. Kitts and Nevis — a Discussion

In 2013, MEAM met with marine spatial planners from throughout the Americas to discuss their experiences and lessons learned, and to hear stories. Among these planners were three individuals who were centrally involved in a MSP process in the Eastern Caribbean nation of St. Kitts and Nevis. At that time, their project had developed a draft marine zoning plan to address the nation's resource management challenges (for full background on the process, including the draft zoning plan: <http://bit.ly/StKittsNevisMSP>).

A transcript of the discussion on St. Kitts and Nevis is below. The planners were

- Marc Williams (MW), Director, Department of Marine Resources, St. Kitts and Nevis;
- Ruth Blyther (RB), Director, Eastern Caribbean, Caribbean Program, The Nature Conservancy; and
- Steve Schill (SS), Senior Scientist, Caribbean Program, The Nature Conservancy

MEAM: Can you provide a little background on the St. Kitts and Nevis MSP process to this point?

MW: I've been Director of Marine Resources for the past two years. It's somewhat of a difficult process when you're talking about marking protected areas in the Caribbean region because most of the region is accustomed to having open waters for fishing and other activities. The idea of protection was not at the forefront until recently – late 90's, 2000's - when we saw fluctuations in our fish stocks. However, it has been a difficult process to convince fishers to protect certain aspects of the marine sphere.

One of the major reasons is that St. Kitts and Nevis has the smallest marine space of all the countries within the region. So what we found when we tried to advance the process of creating a Marine Management Area [an area that would eventually be closed to fishing but open to other activities, including aquaculture] from a purely bureaucratic standpoint, we had resistance from the fishers. So we conducted a small scope process to see what the future of fisheries in St. Kitts and Nevis would look like in the next ten years. What we found was that most of the fishers said that they want marine protected areas.

So what we did - we went around to the various landing sites and held meetings with the fisher folk to see what they would want using the zoning and products that were produced by TNC [The Nature Conservancy] in 2010. Out of these consultations for the past two years we came up with the idea of choosing a path of least resistance first. So what we're going to do, we're going to put in a marine management area without protection for the moment, and then we'll phase in aspects of protection within the next year or two.

This idea seemed to work with the fishers because they realize that we are taking into account their concerns in relation to the management of the marine sphere. So within the next few months we should have a marine management area in place. There is no legal backing yet, but we should have the area demarcated within the next few months.

MEAM: Has there been a particularly memorable moment in the process so far that stands out to you?

MW: During the scoping meetings there were some fishers who were still not in favor of this process, so we went to these fishers - we identified them - and we had individual encounters with them to ask, “You have a problem. How can we solve it?” So we had to go more in depth into aspects of the management of the marine sphere, but most of those fishers are now on board with the idea of the marine management area.

RB: There have been many moments. I would say that one time was at the end of the process that we were doing, at a meeting that we had organized. St. Kitts and Nevis are two islands: there's the island of St. Kitts and there's the island of Nevis, and they're separated by five miles of water. There are ferries that go back and forth between them.

So we did meetings on St. Kitts where we invited people from Nevis to come over and then we did meetings in Nevis. We had to set up this final meeting. It was very important for us - TNC - because we had the final draft options for the design of the marine zoning that we had all been working very hard on for two years. And we had the venue and everybody had been invited, the caterers and all of this. Then we got a really big storm. As you know, this is a hurricane region, and from June until October/November there can be a hurricane or a number of hurricanes. This is what the small island states in the Caribbean live with every year, and it affects whatever you're doing - you really have to be thinking about the significant high-intensity trauma that happens. The saying there is, “Shit happens every year.”

So anyway, there we were in Nevis and all of the ferries and flights and everything had stopped, and nobody could get to the meeting from St. Kitts. And there was pounding down rain, and all the roads in Nevis were flooded. And there we were in our venue - with all of our science people and our maps and everything. And you think, “Well okay. Great. So we've just put all these resources into getting here which was not easy. And now we're going to have to postpone to some future date.”

But what happened was the Nevisian folks came. They came through the flooded streets to the venue, and all showed up in the rain - which was very inspiring for us because we felt like, “Okay this process does mean something to these people and they are very interested.” And so we had a very good meeting in the end and looked over the zoning designs and came up with the options, so that we could go back to St. Kitts later on.

SS: In my mind, I think one of the groundbreaking things about this project was the science part of it. There are a lot of tools out there. There are a lot of brilliant thinkers that have put their minds together and developed these innovative methods. But it's not just science about ecosystems; it's also science about people and understanding people. And so talking about the science part of it, I get really excited about some of the things that my team was able to produce.

We created a very high resolution benthic or underwater habitat map - showing where the corals were, showing where the seagrass was, sandy bottoms, all these different formations under the water. And that information was a critical piece in the whole process. Being able to identify where the important nursery areas are, where important areas for tourism are, and for the fishers.

Another amazing piece of this project, I think, was the development of these fishing intensity maps. And that's one of the most difficult things to obtain for a marine spatial plan - understanding where the important areas for the fishers are. We worked with Ecotrust and used a mapping method that was simple enough for the fishers to be able to provide the information we needed in a scientific way. Very valuable information. It's all built on these data sets that then bring these multiple groups together in a workshop setting.

I kind of like to think of it as a family meeting because I come from a big family. We had nine kids, and we used to have family meetings and there were conflicts that we had to resolve together. We couldn't resolve them unless we were all sitting around the table talking about it. And Dad was our facilitator, and we had to work these things out. It's just like that with marine spatial planning. You're having a big family meeting. You all have interests. You all value the marine space differently. And you have to work through these conflicts and come up with compromises. And I think that the process - the tools, the data - being transparent is very important so that they could have ownership and we could make decisions together.

MEAM: What would you say may be unique or remarkable about the St. Kitts and Nevis process so far?

RB: I think one thing is that given that it is a small green space and it's a small island state - it's marine spatial planning for a whole country. So it's not just one space in the country or one marine area. It's the entire nearshore area around the island. And so that makes it potentially a great model for how to do this on a national scale for small island states. However we are not there yet. You know we're still in process. And that's the other thing I would just like to say to anyone who's doing this or thinking about doing this work is that - it's not a short process.

This is a long process because it involves all the way from the very ground level of fishermen all the way up to the highest level in politics. And really in order for it to work and actually be able to implement a marine spatial plan that actually makes a difference to the resources and the livelihoods and reducing conflicts - to get to that point of implementation is a long process. You really have to think about that before even starting it up. It's how you envision making it through to the end goal and what your milestones are.

MEAM: Any other comments on that point?

MW: Looking at what Ruth said I'd like to support some of her comments. Also you look at the species that are involved with this area - basically there are the same species of fish around both St. Kitts and Nevis. This made it relatively easy: the fishermen target the same types of fish, they have the same concerns, and they have a similar standard of living. So when you sit down in a meeting with them and you ask them about a particular issue - you can get a consensus view on most any topic that you ask them. So putting a single marine management area in place for the entire country came about much more easily than if the fisheries were fragmented as in other countries.

SS: I really like the approach that Marc is leading his group with in terms identifying a common area. Marine spatial planning is all about boundaries. You've got ecological boundaries, you've got political boundaries, you've got socioeconomic boundaries - where do you draw those lines? And it can be difficult in the ocean. Another thing that's unique about it is we started with a clean slate. There were no boundaries in the water already. There was very limited data so we had to think of ways to create consistent data. And so we were starting with first data that people could see and accept at varying levels and then use to design the plan.

It was refreshing that we were doing this plan for two islands but one country. There were some differences there that we had to adapt to, but overall I think it's a great model for other small island nations to follow.

RB: I think the other part was that - as we know with any kind of planning, land use planning, marine planning, family planning - it really comes down to how individuals interact with each other, communicate with each other. And so I like to call it *ego-system* management. So when we manage ecosystems that's one thing, but it's really about the *ego-system* and how you interrelate and what kind of network of people and how they're facilitated to communicate with each other.

And I think some of the things that we could have done a lot better job of is really identifying with those key people in government, in the political level of government, and had a more specific strategy on how to really get them engaged to be the champions for the process. And I think we had very good support from the middle level technical people who really get it and they know why it's important. But at the political level it's always a difficulty.

So we really think that's looking at how to explain this in a different way, rather than just the heavy science or economics that of course plays a part in political decision-making. Jobs play a big part. But it's also about how you tell the story, and so that's something we're learning. And what I'm quite excited about is making it more of a personal connection to why the marine space is so important to the culture of small Island states.

MW: To add to what Ruth said, in our meetings with the fishers, we look at who the alpha male/female is in the room and see if we can reach this person. By reaching this person we will be able to reach those persons who support this person. And we find this strategy as something that has been working from when I started within the Department of Marine Resources. So that's part of the reason we have a high buy-in rate right now in the Marine Management Area.

SS: When we first started the project for our first workshop, we had a lot of people gathered there, and one of the issues that came up was - "Here we are sitting around, we're going to make another plan. Is this plan a means to an end, or is it just going to sit there?" And that's what Ruth and Marc were talking about - you can't forget the policy side and just focus on the science. And you have to do this in phases. You know, the Great Barrier Reef took about thirteen years to develop its first zoning plan. So this takes time. You do it in phases.

You can't neglect the policy. You need those leaders and policies to be able to push it through and actually get these areas declared. It's a different beast that you've got to keep your eyes on. Scientists and policymakers are the geeks and the wonks. We're getting better at building those bridges and communicating and keeping our eyes on both of those parts of the pie.

MEAM: How do you do that?

SS: First you have to recognize that you need to do it. And then I think for the first phase of this project, we laid out a plan with really good science. We brought multiple stakeholders together. Now this next phase will probably be focusing more on the policy side. Working at the legal framework, looking at the political landscape. Identifying those people for alpha males, alpha females that are going to really be the champions and make it happen. You know, "Let's draw some lines in the ocean."

RB: And I think the other part is you have to look for incentives. As we all know, human beings don't like to change. You know, if I've been doing something a certain way all my life, I'm not going to change that. I have to have a reason to change, and I have to have a good incentive to change. So that's part of it all - looking at, okay, what would be the incentive for someone to change?

Some of the things that we've been looking at in other places where we've been working with marine zoning is - could we work with the fishers to do the monitoring, to do the evaluation? So the fishers know how to use fish pots, and they usually use them to catch fish or to eat. But if you set up a marine reserve and you have the funding, you can then pay them to use the fish pots to do monitoring. They pull the pot up, they measure, they weigh, and they release.

And they're getting paid to do it. They're out there doing what they love doing, but they're adding to the science and they are also part of it... If they start seeing changes in the size of the fish that they are pulling up in these protected areas, then they become a much bigger part, saying, "Oh, this is how we want to manage."

And I think the other way is - and I think St. Kitts is looking at this, too - throughout the Caribbean there's quite a movement towards co-management. We don't have many government resources. The fisheries officers have how many boats, Marc?

MW: One.

RB: One boat. So you don't have the resources to go out there and effectively patrol even if you had everything in place. But the fishers once they realize it's really important

to their livelihood, then they're going to self-regulate, and so that's another part of what we're looking at.

MW: I keep urging this co-management process as breaking down barriers between the fishers and the layers of government. What we try to do at the Department of Marine Resources is to meet the fishers in their own element. You may not drink coffee, but if the fishers are having coffee - you drink coffee with them. You drink a beer with them. And we see this has eased the process in getting information from the fishers, so that we could have more effective management of the marine sphere. And they have been volunteering information to us even in times when we don't ask.

So after doing this on an experimental level, we are trying to institutionalize that within the Department. We have fisheries officers assigned to certain landing sites so that they could have a personal relationship with all of the fishers on that landing site. So they do not have to wait until the Department is saying, "We're having a meeting with them." They could interact with the fisheries officer, and that fisheries officer will feed the information back so we could change policies on the fly.

MEAM: If you were approached by somebody who's just getting started with marine planning, what kind of advice would you give them, based on your experience to this point?

SS: We've been talking a lot about green spatial planning this week and I can think of three things. You've got to understand values - people's values. A fisherman will value the ocean differently than someone who's a tourist operator, or someone who's working in industry or resource extraction. There's a lot of uses for the ocean, and so we have to recognize that there are a lot of different values out there.

The second thing would be voice. So everyone needs a voice at the table. They need to be heard. We need to listen.

And the third thing would be vision. So value, voice, and vision. Vision for long term sustainability, and sustainability is different for different people. But sometimes we feel like we're in an environment that's working against us. It's not facilitating our efforts because the political system is always short-term. Marine spatial planning requires long-term commitment. And so developing ways to try to nurture a long-term vision process is a challenging, one of the most challenging, aspects, I think.

MEAM: Any more to add?

MW: You have to talk before you start to walk. You speak with all the stakeholders before you start any marine spatial planning process to see what makes them tick and how the process of establishing marine spatial planning could assist them with their daily lives. So once they can see a win-win in it for everybody, I don't think you would have that much resistance to the process. But if you push it from the top down, then you will have a lot of difficulties, a lot of bottlenecks in the marine spatial planning process.

RB: I think that's the thing, yes. There has to be a reason to do it, and there has to be some motivation coming from the users of the marine space in order to really make this work. What we found with St. Kitts and Nevis is that there were the fishers, the tourism, the transportation, and conservation. There were a number of different conflicts like yacht moorings being put in where the fishers traditionally fished for bait. And so all of a sudden the fishers go there and there's all of these moorings in place and these yachts, and they can't fish for bait.

And that's where you start looking. We have a small space. It's just like in a house. You have to have a place to sleep, a place to cook, a place to wash. And you can't do everything all in one space, otherwise it gets really messy. And in the Caribbean our marine space is very crowded, so more and more there is definitely understanding for the need for that. And there are other projects moving forward, and I have actually been asked by other organizations to help them with doing the same thing.

After they hear what's been done in St. Kitts and Nevis they say, "Wow. We like that. We want to learn from that. We want to start it." So in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we went and assisted. It was definitely a different experience, but we were able to use a lot of the lessons learned from St. Kitts and Nevis.

SS: That's a good point. It's going to be different wherever you go. So it's no 'one-size-fits-all' and 'you have to do such-and-such'. That's a big piece of advice for anyone doing this: be prepared to understand and adapt because it's different wherever you go.

MW: The key point is to understand the culture before you move into an area. And identify the key person who you need to speak to in order to get your process and facts.

MEAM: In hindsight, if you were getting ready to start over again, is there anything that you might do a little bit differently the second time?

RB: Would I do it a second time?

SS: I would pray for fewer hurricanes.

RB: Oh dear. I think that obviously there are always things that you learn when you do things the first time. When I went into it I thought it was much more simple than it turned out to be. I think that what I would do differently would be to be more careful about the expectations that were generated from this process. Because we were able to get to a certain point, but then due to resource restrictions, capacity, timing - all of those things - the whole process for the past two years has kind of sat on the back burner. Not completely getting cold but just kind of bubbling there.

And we're fortunate that the new Director of Marine Resources in St. Kitts and Nevis who just came on two years ago - Marc Williams here - was able to understand, was able to see what we had already accomplished and take it forward. And now we have a little more resources to go back in and provide more assistance. But I think it really is about everyone understanding what can be done with marine spatial planning and what can't be done or the length of time it's going to take to make this happen.

MW: One thing I would like to change if I could have done it before was the stakeholder involvement. When I got into the job I thought it was I alone that had to do everything. Then I realized that certain things I was trying to do - in terms of the management of the marine sphere - were met with a lot of resistance. So I threw my hands up in the air and said, "Tell me what you want." It was then that I found out what they were willing to offer, and then we started the process of dialogue again with each other.

SS: I think just to add to those great words of advice - you have to be realistic. You can't oversell. And so maybe emphasizing that a little bit more would have been good. These are complex situations. And also you have to let the creative juices flow to be able to solve these conflicts. And really listen, because there is no one that understands what's going on in the water more than the locals living there and fishers who go out there day after day. And they know what's going on. Give them the opportunity to provide those creative solutions because they have a lot to offer.

RB: Yeah. The humility. It's like you really have to go into this with a lot of humility. A lot of willingness to really learn and listen, and be transparent about what it is you're doing. And really understand that you're not the one with the answers.

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