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Perspective: Radical MSP can solve social and environmental problems, not just facilitate industrialization

Editor's note: Wesley Flannery is a lecturer in The School of Natural and Built Environment at Queen's University, Belfast, UK. His recent paper ["Exclusion and non-participation in Marine Spatial Planning"](#) was summarized in [MarXiv](#), the free research repository for marine conservation science and marine climate change science.

MEAM: You've said that you are interested in "more radical forms of marine spatial planning." Please tell us more!

Flannery: Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) has become a tool for facilitating 'blue growth' and is in danger of becoming little more than a process that facilitates the rapid industrialization of our coasts and seas. There is very little serious discussion about alternative uses for MSP; rather, the discourse around MSP is that its adoption will facilitate the rational use of marine space and that doing this will solve marine issues. For me, this reduces MSP to a simple zoning process that will maximize opportunities for further marine exploitation but will not address the wide range of marine problems that we face.

A more radical form of MSP would be more about sustainable place building and would be more focused on social and environmental goals. The goals of more radical forms of MSP would focus on solving social and environmental problems – such as how we address issues like coastal poverty through better marine governance. MSP in the UK is meant to address issues like this, but judging by the actual plans, it seems to rely on the trickle-down effect from increased marine development – a model of poverty alleviation that has failed spectacularly in our cities.

MEAM: Do you have any Do's and Don't's for marine planners trying to make their planning processes more equitable/just?

Flannery: To make MSP more just/equitable, we need to:

1. Challenge the idea that MSP is inherently 'rational' – rationality is subjective. Whose rationality gets advanced by MSP is a key question (usually it's the rationality of the most powerful actors). Planners need to be explicit about power differentials across stakeholders and communities and develop engagement processes that address this issue – not every group can hire a lobbyist or make donations to the campaigns of politicians.
2. Move away from MSP as a tool to allocate space and towards MSP processes that are focused on developing sustainable futures for marine places. Planners need to develop processes that prioritize social well-being and environmental sustainability rather than the maximization of marine GDP.
3. Enhance transparency of MSP processes and build the capacity of less powerful stakeholders to participate. Some stakeholders will not be ready to engage in MSP. Planners will need to emphasize how MSP will impact these communities and how they can engage with the process. I once heard a marine planner say, "If you're not at the table, you're on the table" – this is not good enough. We need to work with communities that might not have the resources to engage in what can be a very long, resource-intensive planning process.
4. Move MSP beyond strategic objectives and into action planning. Most MSP processes have developed strategic-level objectives that are very vague and haven't resulted in radical action 'on the water'. Vague, strategic objectives tend to maintain the status quo and serve powerful actors.
5. Finally, rather than tack MSP processes onto existing governance regimes, we need to radically overhaul marine governance institutions – piecemeal institutional change is insufficient and will not lead to radically different or equitable marine futures.

MEAM: Are there any current or past marine planning processes (or parts of processes) that you would like to call out for doing a good job incorporating social and distributional outcome goals? What did they do?

Flannery: No – I'm not aware of any MSP process that has done a really good job in this area. However, I was very impressed with the [Eastern Scotian Shelf Integrated Management \(ESSIM\) Initiative](#), which I researched a few years ago. The team at Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) were very conscious that some communities would not be ready to leap into ocean planning. From talking to these communities, it was clear that they really appreciated the outreach approach that the DFO team adopted and how they got them ready to come to the planning table. The planners were not able to address all issues that arise when you have both weak and powerful actors sitting down to collaborate, but I think they did a really good job of building capacity and making sure no group was excluded from the process.

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