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Preparing data and maps for a regional MSP process: Interview with Nick Napoli

In the US, marine spatial planning is a central component of the national ocean policy, and is being carried out on a phased basis across nine regional planning areas ([MEAM 4:1](#)). The planning process for the northeast region of the US is underway (<https://www.openchannels.org/node/3300>).

Nick Napoli is the Ocean Planning Project Manager for the Northeast Regional Ocean Council, which covers the US states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Much of his work involves ensuring that a wide array of data sets is available to the Northeast regional planning process. The data-gathering work grew from a multi-institutional partnership that formed in 2011 - the Northeast Ocean Data Working Group, consisting of government agencies, NGOs, research institutes, and others. MEAM spoke with Napoli about the challenges involved in this and how he anticipates the data needs may change over time.

MEAM: What are the main challenges you've faced so far in preparing the data and maps for the Northeast regional planning process?

Nick Napoli: First, it is challenging to develop, present, and provide access to maps and data for different audiences. People involved in ocean planning have varying levels of experience and familiarity with the information and different ideas about how they want to interact with it. We are seeing this now more than ever as we have public meetings all around the region.

We have been developing www.northeastoceandata.org as the central repository for our information and we are providing different ways for users to interact with our information. We have always had an application, for example, that allows more experienced users to overlay and download datasets from our catalogue and from a variety of relevant external data catalogues. But we heard that people with less technical experience also wanted access - albeit in a form that was simpler and more focused on the information most relevant to them. We reviewed our data and decided that we spent a lot of our effort on some key themes and maps because they were particularly important to planning in the Northeast - like navigation and transportation areas used for maritime commerce; commercial fishing activity; recreational boating; and existing and proposed energy infrastructure. So we developed a series of thematic maps that allows more direct access to this information, focuses more on the presentation (making it more user-friendly), and provides an opportunity to explain the data and the source of the information. Improving our presentation and characterization of these key maps will continue to be a priority.

Another challenge involves ensuring the data and maps we develop are as useful as possible in a planning and management context. The Northeast Ocean Data Working Group began developing regional data three years ago - in anticipation of the need for such data as part of regional ocean planning, but before a Regional Planning Body had been created. As it happens, it was critical that we started early because we now have a website, some applications, and an excellent basis of information to use in conversations with stakeholders and agency staff.

But now that the formal planning process is underway, our focus is changing from developing a lot of contextual data about the region to further developing certain key datasets through extensive stakeholder and agency input. In order for agency staff, industry, and environmental groups to use our maps, we need to focus on those datasets and information that are really key to the types of management, planning, and regulatory decisions in the region. We are going to continue to have, and likely ramp up, discussions with agency staff that have regulatory and decision-making authority to ensure these maps meet their needs.

MEAM: What other MSP processes have served as guides or inspiration for you?

Napoli: Many of us in the Northeast region have recent experience with state-level planning efforts in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Ocean Management Plan), Rhode Island (Rhode Island Special Area Management Plan), or Maine (Maine Ocean Energy Demonstration Siting Initiative). These provide local models for much of the same data and science we are using, and for understanding the management and stakeholder context. So we tend to rely on these examples when we are thinking about how to engage stakeholders and develop maps and data characterizing a particular use or natural resource.

That said, we definitely benefit and have learned from other processes in the US and abroad, particularly the work in the US state of Oregon, in Northern Europe, and in Australia. I met people involved in efforts in Australia a couple years ago and it was interesting to hear how we share some of these big-picture challenges when integrating data and science for planning purposes.

MEAM: What advice do you have for data managers in other regional planning processes?

Napoli: My first suggestion is to start developing data, maps, applications, a website, etc. for people to react to. Yes, it is essential to understand user priorities and requirements before making significant investments in data and mapping. But people need to see examples and options: these help them to understand what is possible and to articulate their needs. Some planning efforts get bogged down in negotiating and detailing an end product before getting started on data and maps. I think the best way to make progress is by having a tangible example to discuss.

In addition, be transparent and flexible. It is especially important to be transparent at the regional level, where we are integrating a lot of variable information across a broad geographic area that includes a diversity of public interests and government jurisdictions. You also have to be flexible in order to maximize the benefits of people's input. Data priorities, methods, preferences, and technology can change quickly.

For more information:

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