

(Re)connecting society with marine protected areas

by Robbert Casier

“Out of sight, out of mind” is a saying that summarizes well one of the main challenges for marine protected areas (MPA’s), which is finding enough public support for the conservation of the marine realm although most of Europe’s population rarely witnesses the oceans’ wealth. Trees, parks and gardens remind people all the time of the beauty of nature but the treasures of the sea have been admired by far less people. (Re)connecting society with (marine) biodiversity is thus a challenging and extremely important task for marine protected areas. In the 15 MPA’s I visited in 2011 thanks to EUROPARC’s Alfred Toepfer Natural Heritage Scholarship, I witnessed several strategies that try to (re)connect people with nature and business with biodiversity.

(Re)connecting people with nature

For marine protected areas, one of the best strategies to (re)connect people with nature is to give them plenty of opportunities to admire the treasures that are hidden beneath the ocean surface.

A first strategy is to grant people access to the entire MPA, or at least to a buffer zone, which is the case in almost all of the 15 MPA’s I visited. Granting access to an MPA has often caused damage to marine habitats and increased stress on marine species but currently several eco-friendly alternatives such as ecological mooring zones, underwater trails and artificial reefs have been put in place. In the MPA Portofino (Italy - [Portofino](#)), ecological mooring zones have been installed to minimize the impact of anchoring on *Posidonia oceanica*, and more of these mooring zones will be installed in the near future. Since 1979, an underwater trail has been open for the public in the oldest marine park of the Mediterranean, the Parc National de Port-Cros (France - [Port-Cros](#)). While snorkeling, people can explore the ecology and flagship species of the Park and learn from underwater information boards. Artificial reefs are often installed to provide shelter for marine organisms and increase diving activities, such as in the MPA Southern Waters of Gibraltar ([Southern Waters](#)) or impede fishing activities, such as in the MPA Miramare ([Miramare](#)).

A second strategy to (re)connect people with nature is to bring the Park to the people instead of bringing the people to the Park. This philosophy was used in the Cabrera National Park ([Cabrera](#)), a group of islands close to Mallorca, Spain, where a visitor center was built on the mainland. This visitor center contains an aquarium with over 4,000 fishes and invertebrates and plenty of information about the Park’s history and its astonishing marine life. The visitor center is currently receiving more visitors per year (appr. 100,000) than the Park itself (appr. 65,000), meaning that more people have learned about the fauna and flora of the Park. Unfortunately, the Cabrera National Park is currently experiencing major financial problems that affect the core duties of the management authorities.

A third strategy I encountered was the use of educational activities to (re)connect society with nature through children and adolescents. Almost all MPA’s I visited use some sort of educational activities, such as guided tours, workshops and info-days. In the MPA Miramare, an educational activity takes place almost every weekend and in the Réserve Naturelle Marine de Cerbère-Banyuls ([Cerbère-Banyuls](#)), more than 1,000 students visited the marine reserve during the school year 2010-2011.

(Re)connect nature with business

The (re)connection of nature with business in marine protected areas has been challenging but is changing faster and faster. Conservation measures in MPA's normally only start to show significant changes in e.g. number of fishes or total biomass after some years, after which the increase in biodiversity often accelerates exponentially. The diving industry is probably one of the best examples of how MPA's can create good business opportunities. In several MPA's in Europe, the economic value of diving activities (diving itself but also accommodation and other expenses made by divers) is now bigger than the economic value of fishing activities. Many studies have shown that a fish is worth more alive than dead when water conditions are ideal for diving. A dead fish can only be eaten once, but a living fish can be admired by divers for decades, and divers also prefer to watch bigger, older fish. The population in the area around the MPA Levante de Mallorca Cala Ratjada ([Cala Ratjada](#)), increases more than tenfold during summer, from which 6,000 tourists dive in the MPA each year.

The fishing industry increasingly realises that fishing less often means more fish. Almost all MPA's in the Mediterranean contain a core zone, where no fishing is allowed, and a buffer or other zone where fishing is only partially allowed. The "spillover" effect, in which the prohibition of fishing in a small area where species reproduce often results in more fish in that area but also in the surrounding area where fishing is not prohibited, is a perfect example of how the (re)connection of MPA's with business can be extremely successful.

In the MPA Nacionalni park Brijuni ([Brijuni](#)), almost the entire archipelago, tourist facilities and ferry services are currently owned by / in concession by the Park. This means that the majority of the expenses made by the 150,000 visitors each year, can be used for Park maintenance and scientific research. Although this model involves risks (no steady budget), it can be an alternative way to use the entire economic value of a National Park in the Park's best interest.

More information on MPA's in the Mediterranean can be found at <http://www.europarc.org/what-we-do/alfred-toepfer-schol/previous-scholarship/>

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He has a keen interest in marine conservation and marine protected areas. He studied marine geology at Ghent University (Belgium), after which he worked for UNESCO's World Heritage Marine Programme in Paris. He conducted marine fieldwork in a marine lab in Mozambique and volunteered as a ranger in an MPA in South Africa. In 2011, he won one of the Alfred Toepfer Natural Heritage Scholarships.

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