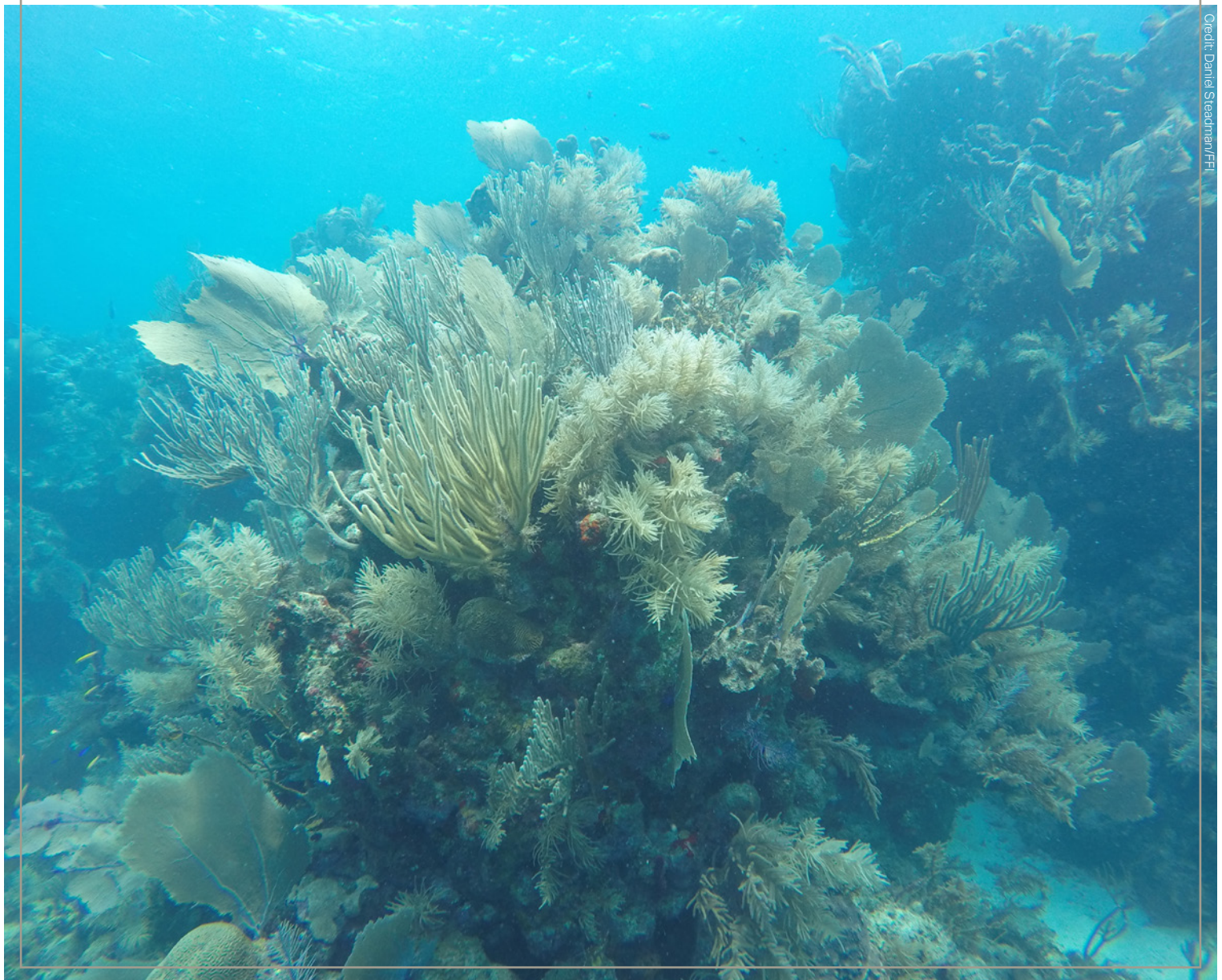FAUNA & FLORA
INTERNATIONAL

Applying the Most Significant Change methodology: What did stories of change tell us about the effectiveness of a seascape project in Honduras?

Credit: Daniel Steadman/FFI

Introduction

Project context:

The Atlántida seascape (paisaje marino) on the Atlantic coast of Honduras is a spatial clustering of three legally designated marine protected areas as well as the non-legally protected waters between them, referred to as the grey area (area gris). Although not a legally recognized management entity, the seascape aims to better integrate the spatial management regimes of the marine protected areas, based around the principles of ecological connectivity, and enhance collaborative governance networks of relevant stakeholders, based around the principles of social connectivity.

The three marine protected areas comprise one coastal site, Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge, and two island sites, Utila Island, within the wider Bay Islands Marine National Park, and Cayos Cochinos Marine National Monument. As with all protected areas in Honduras, site-level collaborative governance is well-established and each site has at least one NGO as a co-manager working under a legal agreement with government.

In 2015, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and a consortium of five Honduran NGOs (Fundación Cuero y Salado, Fundación Cayos Cochinos, Fundación Islas de la Bahía, La Asociación Pro Comunidades Turísticas de Honduras and Centro Estudios Marinos) designed a project focused on strengthening collaborative marine governance across the Atlántida seascape in order to achieve the intended long-term project impact (i.e. change outside the scope of the project). Five outputs were identified as necessary to provide appropriate conditions to achieve the project outcome (i.e. the overall project objective), and these focused on 1) marine management, 2) compliance and enforcement, 3) social capital, 4) human capital and 5) marine evidence base. This project was funded by the Darwin Initiative (grant 23-028) from 2016-19, and below is how it was detailed to the donor.

Long-term impact: The Honduran section of Mesoamerican Reef and associated marine habitat and species are protected and sustainably managed, while participating coastal communities enjoy improved livelihoods and food security, and reduced vulnerability.

Project outcome: Integrated, collaborative management established across an 800,000 hectare seascape, encompassing three Marine Protected Areas, thereby protecting critical habitats and species, making fisheries more susainable, and improving livelihoods and food security of 1,000 people.

EVALUATION CONTEXT

The opportunity to undertake this study arose through a requirement of project funding from the Darwin Initiative for FFI to produce a final evaluation report. Using the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology was planned into the original project proposal. The Darwin Initiative evaluation report has since been rewritten as a peer-reviewed Oryx article.

The Most Significant Change method was chosen as a means of evaluating the seascape project in a manner consistent with a theory-based, participatory and action research-driven approach. It has been used in a wide variety of disciplines as a monitoring and evaluation tool to facilitate inclusive project reflection, learning and adaptation, and has been described as a method that is best suited to project evaluation with 'a short time frame, multiple sites, intangible complex outcomes and a focus on lesson learning'[1], which aligned well with this project.

METHODS

This study used a theory-based approach to impact evaluation[1] to assess the extent to which this project's outcome was achieved and to identify any evidence of longer-term impact. Given the profusion of sites and organizations involved in the project, an adapted version of the most significant change (MSC) interview method was used to capture the perceptions and stories of the individuals and organizations involved.

KEY METHODOLOGY POINTS:

- Conducted 15 in-country interviews across 14 organisations (including all five partner NGOs, small-scale fishers, government and academic bodies) from April to May 2019

- Premised around a single, repeated question: "What are the Most Significant Changes you have experienced [if interviewee was aware of the project] through the 'seascape project'? [if not aware] in the past three to five years?"

- Open-ended follow-up questions posed to help articulate the significance of particular anecdotes or observations

- Interviews were recorded, lasted one hour, and had a translator present where needed *(note – the FFI team managing the project was not present in interviews)*

- No time for full "panel-style" analysis (a feature of typical MSC methodology wherein the project team and interview participants rank and vote on stories to support their validation), so instead conducted in-country workshop with partner NGOs midway through data collection to validate and add to some initially collected stories

- Interviews focussed on identifying both past changes (i.e. achievements), and also desired future changes (i.e. adaptive next steps), all in relation to Darwin outcomes

- All workshop materials and interview footage were re-analysed at FFI HQ, and individual stories and their significance were captured in an Excel database

- Database reviewed twice: 1. to align stories with Darwin-specific outcomes and indicators and 2. to prepare a broader "thematic framework" (latter used for the Oryx article)

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1. Woodhouse, E., De Lange, E. & Milner-Gulland, E.J. (2016) Evaluating the Impacts of Conservation Interventions on Human Wellbeing. Guidance for practitioners. IIED, London, UK.

RESULTS

From across both the workshop and the 15 interviews, a total of 237 change stories were documented: over two-thirds of these (70%) were classified as "Results" that had already happened and under a third (30%) as "Next steps" i.e. desired changes for the future. "Results" stories predominantly described changes analogous to activities (66, 40%) or outputs (70, 43%), with far fewer analogous to outcomes (22, 13%) or impact (7, 4%). Of the five intended outputs of the project, stories were largely focused on changes related to social capital (52, 32%), human capital (36, 22%) and marine management (32, 19%); fewer stories focused on the marine evidence base (8, 5%) or compliance and enforcement (7, 4%). The 30 (18%) changes analogous to outcomes or impact were not aligned to specific output areas. Below, "Results" stories have been categorised against the project's intended outputs, with those relating to outcomes/impact and "Next steps" stories summarised separately. "Next steps" stories were not included in the Oryx paper analysis, which is why the total number of change stories cited above differs, and why these stories are not broken down by output below.

Table 1. Alignment of stories of change with project outputs, outcomes and impact

	Results
Project output area: Social capital	52 (32%)
Project output area: Human capital	36 (22%)
Project output area: Marine management	32 (19%)
Project output area: Marine evidence base	8 (5%)
Project output area: Compliance and enforcement	7 (4%)
Outcome/long-term impact	30 (18%)
All project output areas	165

PROJECT OUTPUT AREA: SOCIAL CAPITAL

- Stories aligned to this output related to the creation of various formal collaboration mechanisms and the resultant improved collaborative governance of the seascape.

- The development and management of two administrative bodies ("the Seascape Forum" and the "Seascape Committee") enabled seascape implementing organisations (particularly NGOs) to put aside their institutional agendas and work together more efficiently and openly:

  "The problem before was that they couldn't see the big picture, we couldn't see that all the partners had things in common and that working together we could achieve more."

- The fisher-focused collaborative body (the "Mesa de Pescadores" or "Fishers' Roundtable") provided a more structured and collaborative space for decision-making.

- Such initiatives have resulted in improved relations between fishing communities:

  "Three years ago, the fishers of Utila and of Cuero y Salado were enemies. We were able to do an exchange, bringing some fishers here and others going there, and now there is a friendly relationship"

  - and have been linked to changes in marine protected area use, primarily through creating shared fisher access agreements – "fishers from Utila used to come and do dive fishing in Cuero y Salado and scare the fish away, whereas now there is an agreement that they use another space"

PROJECT OUTPUT AREA: HUMAN CAPITAL

- Stories aligned to this output were related to a variety of community group-focused activities (e.g. training, inclusion in site management, awareness-raising) and the effects they had.

- It was commonly observed that the material well-being of those dependent on marine resources had improved:

  "In the community of La Rosita, they have been able to sell red and white fish at the same price, where previously white fish was usually of lower value"

- However these stories were more commonly linked to longer-term trends towards better relationships with co-managers leading to increased participation in protected area decision-making by island and coastal communities:

  "[NGO co-manager] developed a strong relationship with a difficult to access community within Cuero y Salado, who originally perceived them as an enforcement organisation – they support community development, improved resource management, and help them to voice their needs at municipality-level"

  – and more responsible practices – "the problem with the nets is improving, because although they are still used, they are not used as much as they were in the past"

- Small-scale enterprise development was an area in which the project seems to have accomplished some preliminary results - *"The No Take Zones are being presented to fishers as a place where they can see a different benefit, such as linking them to the tourism sector, doing snorkelling or community tours as an alternative source of income"*

PROJECT OUTPUT AREA: MARINE MANAGEMENT

- Stories aligned to this output related to specific management activities (e.g. spatial management planning/zonation, habitat restoration, species management, fundraising) and how these ongoing activities had been influenced by the project.

- Many of these stories were about management institutions learning from one another and adapting as a result - the:

  "first no-take zones [i.e. areas of strict spatial closure within designated sites] established around Utila in 2018 have become more organized...learning from experiences in Cayos Cochinos"

- This 'management network' seems to have also broadened interviewees' perspectives on the Atlántida seascape and enabled more seascape-level thinking – *"we have the same ecosystems and the same problems. And we have fishers who move between these areas."*

- However, there was widespread recognition that the "grey area" between MPAs remains a largely unknown area (biologically and in terms of threats) and has received a lack of management attention:

  "Fishers can leave the protected area and go and fish in the grey area where there is no management, and do whatever they like."

PROJECT OUTPUT AREA: MARINE EVIDENCE BASE

- In these stories, interviewees described how the project had helped to 'gather baseline data' and 'obtain better quality data' relevant to the seascape.

- Both NGO and academic interviewees highlighted that 'the partner network was very important in enabling this', including through the creation of a common database:

  "created a common database for all of the biological information on the marine landscape through encouraging all of the partners to share their individual datasets, establishing a strong baseline"

- One NGO co-manager commented that such data were used to inform management of CSWR:

  "FUCSA has now gathered baseline biological data, important for establishing appropriate management, zonation and monitoring plans for Cuero y Salado"

PROJECT OUTPUT AREA: COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT

- Stories aligned to this output related to a better understanding of the rules, increased support from enforcement entities and reduced infringements.

- The majority of the observed results from interviews described a greater appreciation from fishers of the purpose of regulations and, therefore, of the need to comply with them:

  "Local fishers respect the lobster season closures as they have a better understanding of why they are in place, which has resulted in larger lobster and conch catches when they're opened"

- There was a similar amount of evidence that a better culture of compliance had led to demonstrable reduction in infringements against fishing rules:

"Banning of netting and diving, and patrols to enforce this have helped a lot with improving fishing livelihoods [in CSWR]"

- One fisher also highlighted better connections between co-managers and higher-level enforcement entities - they are now *"very vigilant with no-take zones... if someone comes to fish, they call the navy"* – and although this increase in capacity was welcomed, there were also some less positive stories - *"Patrols bring netters/scuba fishers to HQ, but then let them go with all of their gear, so they go back to fishing illegally. They should be fined and/or have their gear removed."*

OUTCOME AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

- Outcome-level changes focused on recent or longer-term changes in fishery productivity, with fishers reporting that "the fish banks [or no-take zones] are reproducing more"

- This was repeatedly linked to reductions in damaging practices – *"a reduction in spearfishing and therefore bycatch of parrotfish"* - driven by a greater respect for, and therefore compliance with closures.

- Regarding flagship species, community groups expressed the sense that hunting pressure on turtles in CCMNM, iguanas in Utila/BIMNP and manatees in CSWR had all reduced:

"I remember my grandfather and uncles used to hunt and eat manatee, [co-manager] and fishers protect the manatee now and I have noticed manatee juvenile numbers increasing"

- Additionally, the success of mangrove reforestation was frequently cited; not just that these activities were completed but that they were a) more successful than past attempts to plant mangroves and b) had benefitted from knowledge exchange between different NGO co-managers regarding best practice.

- One NGO co-manager provided the most compelling interview evidence (attributed to the project) of the reciprocal impacts of marine protected areas delivering improved biodiversity and benefits to people:

"[the] community recognize[s] the importance of sustainable fisheries and their support with protection efforts because they can perceive the positive impacts"

NEXT STEPS

- According to interviewees, the project's most critical next steps should be around growing and better coordinating the "social network":

"Need to engage beyond original six partners, particularly government, to ensure that the entire landscape is appropriately managed (not just within the MPAs)"

- There was also a sense that there needed to be increased focus on systemic, seascape-wide threats:
"Project did not take into account threats from outside the landscape (e.g. terrestrial environment), therefore if this project is going to scale up, it would need to convene a larger group of stakeholders to address these wider threats."

and operationalising some of the key "seascape" approaches in order to further integrate the three MPAs and the "grey area" in-between:

"I would like to see better protection of the "grey area", as currently fishers from all areas can do whatever they want, including trawling"

- Plus they identified several areas in which strengthening various existing seascape approaches could continue to drive impact, including formally operationalising the established collaborative governance bodies:

"The Mesa [Fishers' Roundtable] needs a strategic plan on how to best execute these agreements"

– increasing the quality and amount of collaboration on data collection - "we work with mangroves, and so do they. It would be good to know what results they are achieving, what hasn't worked, and to share the experiences of the differences between the two areas" - and enhancing the capacity, visibility and effectiveness of formal enforcement organisations, with interviewees wanting to see better "mechanisms" for these bodies to collaborate and a need for more "practical tools" and "better links between justice operators".

Credit: Vance Russell/FFI

CONCLUSION

This study showed that in the Atlántida Seascape in Honduras, social capital was the most consistently identified category of significant change by a range of interviewees, from seascape users to managers. A combination of activities and outputs of the evaluated project have contributed to groups of actors involved in the seascape functioning as a social network, operating through a suite of collaborative mechanisms. This finding supports the theory that conservation success in cross-boundary initiatives depends on the strength and proliferation of connections in a collaborative network. Additionally, the study indicated that multi-level governance institutions were perceived as having resolved long-standing fishery resource conflict, evidencing that the seascape has provided a mechanism for stakeholders to address problems collectively. Evidence also suggests that all sites are now more legitimately co-managed, and community-based interviewees linked this to changes in their behaviour, for example compliance. Finally, perceived changes associated with the seascape project's outcome and long-term impact were less frequently observed, however evidence of perceived ecological recovery tentatively link seascapes to recent research around the effectiveness of appropriately scaled, ecosystem-based and collaboratively governed marine management that balances strict protection with sustainable use.

As well as proving a useful process to evaluate project progress to date, the study also helped to identify priority next steps that can be used to inform adaptive management. According to interviewees, the priority next steps related to either further enhancing the social network through increasing participation and coordination, or strengthening efforts to address seascape-wide threats, including the current lack of protection in the "grey area" in-between the three MPAs.

LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT ABOUT THE MSC METHODOLOGY AND ITS UTILITY THROUGH THIS STUDY?

1. Great fit with FFI institutional ethos i.e. doesn't rely on FFI centrally generating/analysing/ storing project evidence but instead supportively and objectively evaluate change

2. Huge potential to use for short-term needs (donor reporting) and longer-term ambitions (institutional learning)

3. If thoroughly documented (would recommend recording interviews), creates a rich, durable dataset that could have multitude of uses (M&E workshopping, project/fund planning, communications, academic analysis/publication)

4. Requires prior planning (e.g. good spread of interviewees, plan for video recording etc.)

5. Interviews can be completed with the assistance of a translator, but how the discussion is guided is very dependent on the ability and understanding of the translator

6. Potential to combine with/influence use of participatory evaluation elsewhere across FFI e.g. Participatory Impact Assessments (PIAs)

7. Requires assembly of a willing, internal team to analyse videos in a rapid fire and structured data processing session

8. Could use any one of a number of thematic coding techniques to inform data analysis, and can draw on expertise from others internally that have done this recently

9. A very collaborative process, however the write up is an individual and time-consuming task, therefore need to appreciate the time it takes

10. Worth exploring use in long-running, multi-site, complex and growing initiatives

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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For additional guidance on how to use the Most Significant Change methodology to evaluate your project, please refer to the internal FFI guidance that can be found in FFI's MEL Atlas.

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