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Innovations in Capacity Building: Certification of Marine Protected Area Professionals

by Lesley J. Squillante, Glenn Ricci and Julius Francis

Introduction

With the growing need to preserve and protect the world's marine resources, have come accelerated calls for increased numbers of marine protected areas (MPAs). At the same time there are growing concerns about the management effectiveness of existing MPAs. As part of the Sustainable Coastal Communities and Ecosystems (SUCCESS) Program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Coastal Resources Center (CRC) at the University of Rhode Island (URI) together with the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) and stakeholders in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region developed the Western Indian Ocean Certification of Marine Protected Area Professionals, or WIO-COMPAS Program http://www.WIO-COMPAS.org/—the first in a planned global network of such regional programs referred to as the MPA PRO Program.

In this Program, when individuals earn certification they earn the right to use the title "MPA PRO", which indicates they have demonstrated proven performance on the job, have met rigorous standards and have a broad set of skills in core competence areas recognized as integral to successful MPA management. The Program was designed by an international group of MPA professionals with practical first hand experience at all levels of MPA management. While pioneered in the WIO region, it was meant to expand to other world regions where it would be adapted and "branded" to suit regional needs and clients while holding true to the core concepts, structure, and principles of the larger, overarching MPA PRO model. These regional programs then comprise a professional network through which MPA PROs can share experience, promote approaches that work, and avoid repeating proven mistakes. This article focuses on the rationale for MPA certification, the process used to design the pilot in the WIO region, progress to date in implementing the Program there, emerging interest of other regions in replicating the Program, and lessons learned in developing the model.

Why Certification?

Many professions utilize certification as a methodology for attesting to the skill level of a professional in their area of expertise. Certifications are not intended to teach an individual how to "become" a certain type of professional, but rather are meant to measure an individual's knowledge, skills and ability to apply these in real-life professional situations. Certifications can also provide incentives for retention of MPA staff and reenergize some leaders, a challenge that many training programs try to achieve. A goal of certification is to standardize the credentials for excellence in a profession and to help ensure that those professionals who receive the certification speak the same (professional) language, have a common understanding of the issues, and share the same concepts—even though application of these may differ in order to accommodate differences in the geopolitical, social, and economic contexts of different countries and regions.

In line with this thinking, the WIO-COMPAS Program and subsequent other regional programs within the MPA PRO Program are designed to assess whether individuals meet certain standards in seven core competence areas; recognize those who do; provide additional and on-going opportunities for continued professional development to stay abreast of today and tomorrow's most pressing

issues for MPAs; facilitate the networking of these certified individuals into a cadre that shares and learns together over time; and promote the practice of MPA management within a code of ethical conduct.

Why certify individuals instead of sites? Maximum management effectiveness of MPAs will likely result when there are both types of certification. The MPA PRO model is only a first, albeit an important, step in that direction. Again, certifying both sites and individuals is the ideal. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) has explored the idea of certifying MPA sites and continues to move in that direction. In the meantime, its World Commission on Protected Areas/Marine has endorsed WIO-COMPAS—recognizing that having certified individuals working in sites can play an important role in achieving the overarching goal of certifying MPA sites themselves.

WIO-COMPAS: Pioneer of the MPA PRO

The concept for the WIO-COMPAS Program began in 2006 with WIOMSA and CRC using a collaborative approach to engage leaders and practitioners from within and outside the region at every step. It began with collecting stakeholders' views on the need for a professional MPA association that would have certification at its core. This was done through need and demand surveys of potential clients—both potential enrollees in such a program and those who would fund/support their participation—and through an initial audit of appropriate training providers in the region. Once those surveys showed demand and interest, initial stakeholder workshops helped shape the framework of the Program. This has been complemented with input from stakeholders—including certified MPA PROs, donors, assessors, and others—over the course of the four years that the Program has been under development.

The result—the WIO-COMPAS Program—offers certification at three levels and in multiple languages. To become certified, individuals must complete the Program and meet standards of education, knowledge, skills, experience, and on-the-job performance in seven core competence areas: Policy, legislation and compliance; MPA concepts and establishment; Communication and stakeholder engagement; Financial management and fundraising; Management operations; Biophysical and socio-cultural environment; and Leadership and ethics.

WIO-COMPAS identified these as the core competences shared between most MPA professionals in their respective job roles (levels) through a process that considered existing international guidelines on MPA effectiveness (e.g., the IUCN guide, "How is your MPA Doing?" and the World Bank MPA Scorecard); the professional judgment of MPA practitioners in and outside the region; and a review of the competence areas covered in key MPA training courses (e.g., various MPA courses hosted by WIOMSA and South Africa).

Certification levels are tailored to the experience and expertise needed to effectively carry out different MPA job functions, and entry to any level is based on the individual's years of work experience in MPAs, academic achievement and performance on-the-job. The three levels of the MPA Pro Program and the types of professionals each targets follows.

- MPA PRO ~ Field Operations: for rangers and field operators engaging with communities and enforcing laws
- MPA PRO ~ Site Management: for MPA managers, wardens and section leaders with supervisory roles
- MPA PRO ~ Policy & Planning: for agency directors and managers focused on regional policy and networking of MPAs

The road to earning certification as an MPA professional and the right to use the "MPA PRO" title is a rigorous process using a suite of assessment instruments—application, references, case study report, field exercises, written assessment, professional development sessions, presentation, portfolio and interviews. Having a broad suite of assessment instruments provides candidates with a range of opportunities to provide evidence of their competences in all areas. The rigorous application process itself ensures that those admitted into the program already have a certain level of education and experience and have proven their ability to perform on the job.

Management Structure

Five groups share in different governance aspects of the WIO-COMPAS Program.

Certification Bodies. The WIOMSA Board, which is composed of leaders from across the region, serves as the legal entity to the WIO-COMPAS Program. The WIOMSA Board and CRC/URI serve as the co-certification bodies. The Board also provides technical oversight, guidance, credibility, promotion and fundraising for the program as a whole.

Advisory Committee. An advisory committee provides guidance and feedback to WIOMSA and the Secretariat on how to maintain rigor, decentralize the program and identify opportunities for certification offerings. The committee is comprised of regional and international representatives including CRC/URI and capacity-building institutions.

Program Secretariat. WIOMSA serves as the Secretariat for WIO-COMPAS, providing coordination and day-to-day operations and acting as a hub for assessors. CRC/URI assists the Secretariat in developing their capacity and procedures through back office support, program development and delivery, and providing technical support to the program as a whole. CRC/URI is a co-certifier and will conduct quality control evaluations annually to ensure high standards of operation and integrity of the program.

Assessors. Assessors, acting as independent experts, are responsible for evaluating each candidate's competences through a process that includes application interviews, mentoring candidates through their case study, conducting the assessment event and providing recommendations to the Board for certification of successful candidates. Assessors conduct the assessment activities only—i.e., they do not conduct any instruction. The Secretariat (and local partners) manages all logistics and marketing of the certification offerings.

MPA organizations. The MPA organizations, both government and nongovernmental, play a key role in promoting the program, encouraging staff to apply, endorsing the application of individual candidates, confirming validity of application materials, facilitating the case study process, verifying portfolios and most importantly supporting MPA PROs upon their return to work. Representatives are invited to serve as members of the Advisory Committee.

The WIO-COMPAS Program offers a model for certifying MPA professionals that:

- Is rigorous enough to vet applicants in a way that helps ensure those accepted into the program are likely to succeed; and yet is structured to advise those who do not qualify as to the additional skills and experience they need in order to be accepted into a future event
- Offers a first-ever set of core competences and standards for MPA professionals—to help guide and ensure consistency of training provision for MPA professionals at three

different levels—irrespective of the MPA site where that professional works

- Is building a first cadre of professionals working in MPAs who are now certified as MPA PROs, and who are recommending the Program to their peers, and ready to contribute to the assessment and professional development process in future events
- Recognizes a candidate's knowledge and skills and yet also identifies each candidate's professional weaknesses—as a way to highlight gaps in skills and experience that the candidate may need to address as part of their ongoing professional development/growth
- Has been successfully tested as both a centralized and decentralized model
- Established the protocols and procedures for using assessors trained in the assessment methodology to evaluate candidates' skills and experience and to train others in and outside of the region in this assessment methodology
- Developed a set of assessment instruments and approaches that include written documentation, verbal interviews, field exercises, simulations and written components—allowing for the different styles through which individuals are able to express what they know and what they can do
- Linked to the above, a scoring system that provides candidates with multiple opportunities to show evidence of competence—as opposed to having a single exam or negative points if a candidate does poorly in a single instrument
- Endorsed by the IUCN/WCPA-Marine—a possible first step toward linking certification of MPA sites and certification of professionals working in those sites

Expanding to New Regions

While the WIO-COMPAS Program design has evolved over the past four years of development and implementation, a consistent goal from the start has been to develop a model that could be adapted and replicated for MPA (or other natural resource management) professionals in any coastal region or country of the world. Latin America is the first region to come forward since the program was first launched in East Africa. This past year, Latin American MPA leaders contacted the MPA PRO Program Coordinators at CRC, expressing a desire to replicate the certification model for their region. In October 2009, a regional workshop was held so these leaders and other interested stakeholders could learn about the currently running Program in the eight-country WIO region and how it could integrate existing Latin America capacity building efforts to create a professional structure flexible for each country. Based on the leaders' assessment of the MPA PRO model, they agreed to move forward in establishing their regional brand of the program, which in Latin America will be referred to as PRO AMP.

Regardless the region where the program is being established, there are a number of factors key to ensuring the success of adapting and implementing the MPA PRO model. While these emerged over time as the WIO-COMPAS was being designed and implemented, they are likely universal factors in the successful start-up of the Program in any region.

Strong regional organization that has the respect of and a network with practitioners

Having WIOMSA, a respected science and capacity building regional membership organization in existence since 1993, as a co-founder of this Program has been a key factor in the success of WIO-COMPAS to date. WIOMSA, as a respected and trusted name in the region—known for representing and responding to the needs and interests of its membership—was able to provide the program with easy access to stakeholder input

and buy-in at all levels and throughout all phases of the program's research, development, marketing, and implementation phases. Further, its successful track record with delivering a good return on donor's investment has opened doors for securing the leveraged funding that is essential to bearing the heavy costs that accompany start-up of a Certification Program.

Conduct demand and needs survey

Collect the ideas, input, concerns, statements of interest and need, etc. of those who will be the clients of the program—1) the practitioners/ professionals working on the ground at MPA sites, and 2) those that will employ MPA professionals and/or fund the workings of the MPA. All have different insights that can help strengthen the program and have, as well, different concerns that must be addressed to avoid needless pitfalls. When such stakeholders see their input and "voice" reflected in the final program design, chances for buy-in and support are greatly increased.

Build buy-in from regional practitioners, governments and donors

While buy-in starts with a demand survey, it does not end there. Keep regional players involved as appropriate at all stages of the process—from early Program design, to Program implementation, evaluation and revision. Include regional players on the Program Advisory Committee and Board and invite them to events and award ceremonies, and to help raise funds.

Adapt the certification process and assessment instruments to suit regional context

The previous three actions should already set the stage for program design and content that reflect regional needs and realities. Care should be taken as well, however, to also ensure that the processes to market the Program, vet applications, and deliver the Program reflect the unique socio-economic, political, and educational contexts of the place. For example, in the WIO region, the preference for verbal vs. written communications led to adapting the program's application process to include not only a written element but also a verbal interview between the Assessor and his/her assigned applicants. Also, a range of assessment tools allowed candidates for the program to communicate their skills and experience through both written and verbal exchanges and during multiple interventions over a period of time instead of through a one-off written exam.

Lessons Learned

Building the WIO-COMPAS Program has generated lessons that may help others seeking to develop a Certification Program.

Expense

The WIO-COMPAS initiative, the equivalent of a small-business start-up, has been expensive to design, market, and launch. As with all "research and development" efforts, these costs reduce as the model becomes refined and systems, protocols and procedures standardized. Until then, however, costs to get such a Program fully up and running can come close to US$1.5million. While USAID was the primary funding agency for this effort, additional support was provided by the Swedish International Development Agency, and the European Union through its Regional Coastal Management Programme for the Indian Ocean Countries (ReCoMap).

Competences

It is not possible to certify all competences needed in professions that require a highly diverse skill set—as is the case in the profession

of MPA management. Instead, the focus must be on identifying the core competences needed in the profession and certifying that individuals meet these.

Decentralization

Decentralizing the Program presents time and money challenges. To grow, the Program must be offered at more than a regional scale/venue. It must provide in-country offerings managed by in-country groups. In the short term, the "transfer" and set up of the Program's systems and protocols and the time spent in identifying in-country delivery partners and in training those partners, etc. can be time-consuming and expensive. Only over time and as a number of in-country offerings have been conducted, do efficiencies of scale and cost emerge. As the Program is decentralized, there is also the challenge of ensuring consistency of quality (content, delivery, assessment) from country to country, with each staying true to the core structure, competence areas, and standards of the global MPA PRO Program.

Independence

The strength of a Certification Program is its ability to provide independent and neutral assessors. A regional Program can achieve this with minimal challenges. However, in a region where there is a small community of professionals it is more challenging to ensure that assessors are not a supervisor or government agency responsible for promoting staff. For small island countries, maintaining independence and professionalism can be an acute challenge.

Assessor Skills

Selecting assessors requires more than simply choosing individuals who are respected and skilled in the professional field that is the focus of the certification. Individuals selected as assessors must have skills in how to assess other individuals' skills in a range of competence areas. This is especially true when the assessor is unfamiliar with the candidate's work experience or the full context within which a candidate has performed his/her job. Assessment has its basis not in the field of management, but the field of education. While individuals who are not already skilled assessors can be trained, this increases the time and costs of implementing the Program.

Consistency

Decentralization requires mechanisms to ensure consistency of scale, scope, and quality of delivery of services. The greatest chances for consistency emerge when the level of detail for standards for each core competency and for assessing an individual's level of competence against those standards are many and rigorous. The challenge is maintaining rigor in standards while not making the tools and process for measuring them too arduous, costly, and time-consuming. Good assessor training and initial mentoring is also required to ensure consistency.

Buy-In

It is important to have local, national, and regional buy-in from recognized key players in the discipline in which you are to certify. Often, however, the groups you wish to endorse your Program are hesitant to give public statements of support until they know they are certifying a product/service that has already proven itself worthy/valuable. For this reason, it is essential to identify—from the start—those key stakeholder groups whose endorsement you would seek and involve them in the design and development of the Program. Individuals certified through your Program also can be great ambassadors in getting buy-in from their own and partner organizations.

Language

While it is important to offer the program in multiple languages, this comes with costs for translating websites, marketing materials, program and assessor manuals, and professional development materials. As professionals seek to advance to higher levels in the certification program, they will need more developed English language skills, as the highest level of the Certification Program is conducted only in English.

Relevance

It is essential to ensure the topics chosen as part of the professional development segment of the Program are timely and relevant for the professional discipline in which you are certifying. For example, the first WIO-COMPAS event at the MPA PRO 2 ~ Site Management level included dialogue on global climate change as it is affecting and will continue to affect how MPAs are managed.

Networking

While networks abound, value-adding, active networks are rare. The challenge is finding the right virtual space in which individuals feel comfortable to engage in reflective dialogue and to share practical tips, tools, case studies, and experience. The key to the success of any network lies in understanding, appreciating and building upon existing *informal* networks.

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