

Marine Protected Areas:

A Human-Centric Concept

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The proposal to establish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), made by the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), under the new 1996 Oceans Act needs to apply deep ecology to an actual environmental issue. The literature that I have seen on MPAs seems to appeal to human economic self-interest, such as how fishers can benefit. Yet fishers seem to feel that they have some proprietary lock on the oceans from which the public is excluded. It seems a stupid strategy to try and mollify fishers while trying to establish MPAs. In order to create fully protected, extensive ocean sanctuaries which are not undercut by fishing or fossil fuel interests there must be a new social base, including more than just fisher people. Conservation must raise an all-species perspective and oppose anthropocentrism. The primary issue in any MPA discussion should be philosophical, trying to change how humans look at the oceans and their life forms.

Choices in life are driven by philosophy, although few of us think about how our actions and philosophies are related. Those who support deep ecology believe that there has to be a fundamental change in consciousness of how humans relate to the natural world. This requires a change from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric perspective-seeing humans as a species with no superior status. All other species have a right to exist, irrespective of their usefulness to the human species. Humans cannot presume dominance over all non-human species of life and see nature as a resource for our utilization. We have to extend the ethical circle outwards, towards the oceans and the Earth. All life is one.

The true conservationist, or Earth-citizen, must be prepared to oppose his/her own self-interest for the benefit of other creatures and their habitats. The justification for MPAs should not be one of self-interest. Protection of marine areas should not be based on which (human) shareholders shout the loudest in opposition. A fundamental question about MPAs is whether to appeal to economic interests or to rise above this, by promoting overall ecological and social interests.

A Marine Protected Area must mean full ecological protection from human exploitive interests, otherwise the term itself becomes debased. Degrees of restriction of the human use of an oceans area could be encompassed, using another term such as Marine Regulated Area, rather than using, and debasing, the term "protected area."

According to the Oceans Act, MPAs rest on an assertion of ownership over the internal waters, the territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone. In a press release December 19, 1996, the federal fishing minister said the passage of the Oceans Act "reaffirms Canada's sovereign ocean rights..."

Supporters of deep ecology believe no one can own the Earth, whether from a state, individual or collective point of view. Asserted ownership is ultimately a convenient social fiction deriving from a human society bent on enforcing a claim of control over other creatures and the Earth itself.

The Oceans Act is not based on deep ecology. According to this Act, Canada's Ocean Management Strategy (of which MPAs are a part) is to be based on support for the principles of sustainable development. This concept, which sanctifies continuous economic growth and consumerism, should not be accepted. We need to drastically scale back economic growth and consumerism not expand it. Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, in their 1996 book **Our Ecological Footprint**, though presenting quite a human-centered perspective, point out that to live sustainably, we must ensure "that we use the essential products and processes of nature no more quickly than they can be renewed, and that we discharge wastes no more quickly than they can be absorbed." Moreover, they point out that if everyone on Earth had the average Canadian or American lifestyle, then three planets would be needed for a sustainable lifestyle for the world's population.

The Oceans Act uses the word "resource" to cover non-human creatures living in the oceans. The automatic assumption that nature is a resource for corporate and human use is an indication of our total alienation from the natural world. It implies a human-centered, utilitarian world view and that humans are somehow the pinnacle of evolution.

The word "stakeholder" means anyone interested in MPAs, lumping together those who want to exploit the oceans with people who have ecological and social interests. It makes no distinction between, say, inshore fishers who have a long term personal commitment to living off of the oceans, and oil and gas companies who pack up and move whenever richer fields are found. The concept seems to imply that out of the various competing interests, a lowest common denominator, general good will emerge. Ultimately, we are all stakeholders in a planetary well-being sense, yet non-human stakeholders are not considered. In terms of MPAs, who has more at stake than the seals, the fish and the algae?

The Oceans Act says that its legislation upholds existing treaty rights of aboriginal peoples as outlined in the Constitution Act of 1982, under section 35. Translated, this means that a MPA can be subject to exploitation by aboriginal peoples. This puts ecology subordinate to human society.

The DFO seems to have replaced Parks Canada as the leading federal agency in marine protection, yet it has been intimately concerned with promoting corporate exploitive interests in fisheries policies. Put another way, the DFO does not question the assumption that marine ecology should serve the industrial capitalist economy. For Parks Canada, maintenance of ecological integrity was considered the first priority in park zoning and visitor use.

The nature of our capitalist society influences how we think about MPAs. I support protecting marine areas, but free of human exploitation. MPAs need to become a reflection of ecocentric thinking. The question is: Will MPAs be the beginning of a new ecological way of preservation or a subterfuge for the continued industrial exploitation of the oceans using greenwashing?

A step in choosing marine areas to protect is to assess all the stakeholders. Humans are one group—those with a direct economic interest being only a sub-group. After all, the term protected area implies protection from humans. The other stakeholders, who usually remain voiceless at meetings, are the marine animals, plants and other organisms. Their interests have to be given more weight than human concerns.

MPAs cannot be just minor set-asides. We cannot have dead zones between them. MPAs are not about creating wildlife reservations, because the nature of our society influences life inside these areas. Wider phenomena, like global warming, do not stop at MPA boundaries. Therefore a new, global, marine vision is necessary. Why don't we set aside oceans giving them protected status and then have workshops and meetings about which small areas should be opened up for human exploitation, of course, done sustainably?

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