MPAs are critical to ecological integrity and human well-being

The Maldives is made up of approximately 2,000 distinct coral reefs, covering over 4,500 square kilometres. Other important habitats include seagrass beds, mangroves and sandy lagoons. With a relatively small terrestrial area, marine resources provide the main base of economic activity, contributing to employment, food, protection and shelter.

Tourism and fisheries are the mainstay of the Maldives’ economy and are highly dependent on the marine environment. However, increasing pressure from the growing local population and tourism threaten the integrity of important marine habitats and resources. Marine Protected Area’s (MPAs) are being used in the Maldives as a tool for managing natural marine resources both for biodiversity conservation and the well-being of people dependent on them for food and income.

Marine resources provide valuable ecosystem services

Tourism currently accounts for the largest share of the Maldives’ GDP, followed by the fisheries sector. According to the Sixth National Development Plan, “the tropical island environment and the marine biological diversity of the Maldives have proved to be unique marketable assets, in a country which is devoid of any other commercially exploitable resources.”

It is calculated that the marine biodiversity of the Maldives generates almost 71 percent of national employment, 49 percent of public revenue, 98 percent of exports and 89 percent of national GDP. With no rivers or freshwater habitats, the sea is also the main source of protein for the people of the Maldives.

MPAs need a strong regulatory framework

MPAs were first established in the Maldives in 1995 under the Environment Act 4/93 in order to prevent over-exploitation and to improve conservation. This was an initial step to protect specified areas from the negative and harmful consequences of over-fishing, coral mining, anchor damage and garbage dumping. Currently there are 42 areas protected under the Environmental Protection and Preservation Act and five sites protected under the Fisheries Act.

MPAs face serious challenges

MPAs in the Maldives play an important role however significant challenges still exist to their sustainability and management.

The Maldives is made up of 26 atolls, and some 1,190 islands. The atoll ecosystems are especially rich in biodiversity, and contain over 1,090 fish species and 187 coral species.

Approximately 15,000 fishers and their families in the Maldives depend on fishing for their livelihoods.

Globally significant marine fauna such as whale sharks and manta rays aggregate year round in the Maldives’ waters attracting divers from all over the world and generating income to the local economy.
Human impacts lead to degradation and depletion of natural resources

- Increased demand for marine resources by a growing local population and tourists
- Poor waste management practices
- Poorly planned urban development projects – land extension, harbour and resort development projects which require intensive dredging and reclamation and which lead to silting and sedimentation on nearby reefs

Management of MPAs faces many challenges

- Dispersed nature of the islands and MPAs hinders effective monitoring, control and surveillance efforts
- Weak financial and human capacity (amongst all stakeholders) makes management and law enforcement within MPAs a challenge
- Jurisdictional conflicts of interest between lead governing authorities
- Conflicts between resource users e.g. fishers, dive operators, liveaboards etc
- Varying political will and priorities
- Lack of awareness among stakeholders of the importance and benefits of MPAs hinders cooperation on their establishment and management

Government policies for MPA management

- Management policies for MPAs are moving towards a community-based, decentralized approach
- Broadening the criteria for selecting protected areas (conservation, fishery reserves, fish aggregation sites, breeding grounds etc.)
- Setting up networks of MPAs throughout the country
- Introducing an Environmentally Sensitive Areas list
- Introducing different management approaches and concepts, such as MMAs (marine managed areas), biosphere reserves and World Heritage Sites
- Establishing mechanisms to ensure sustainable financing for MPA management (Green Fund set up in 2013)

Recommendations for improving MPA management and effectiveness

- Speedy decentralization of MPA management by fostering community involvement
- Institutional capacity building for implementation and enforcement of MPA management plans
- Harmonisation of laws and regulations to achieve MPA objectives
- Development of a regulation to manage protected areas
- Regular monitoring of resources within MPAs to assess the success of such areas
- Undertake monitoring and review of coastal development projects
- Improve the Environmental Assessment process
- Increase awareness among resource users on the importance and benefits of establishing MPAs

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