



Protecting Blue Horizons

The social scientist

One possible scenario: Along the western coast of an island in a temperate sea, a species rich ecosystem needs urgent protection. As a result, also the octopus population, a commercially important species for the local fishers can recover. Overfishing, particularly from destructive bottom trawling, pollution and invasive species, strain the ecosystems. In order to protect fish and octopus nursery areas and allow the juvenile individuals to grow, a Marine Protected Area (MPA) is being planned.

NB Another scenario can be chosen for all to fit your context better, applicable to all. See fictional map or use a map of a coastal area close by to help visualise the conflict areas between different interests.

MPAs are geographically distinct zones which aim at safeguarding the biodiversity through habitat protection, maintaining marine ecosystem healthy or restore them to a healthy state for the supply of ecosystem products and services. They are fundamental because they help to release the pressure on the habitats and on the species. Indeed, many human activities and all the phenomena linked to the climate change put a huge pressure on ecosystems.

Imagine being a social scientist like a social anthropologist or an economist with an interest say in understanding the constraints and opportunities of major groups of stakeholders affected by the planned MPA. You are part of an international research network investigating the conditions for increasing marine protection in several countries in order to comply with the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) agreed in December 2022. The GBF as a whole includes 23 action-oriented targets. Eight targets address reducing the threats to biodiversity, five deal with people's needs and nine cover tools and solutions including action by governments, businesses and citizens as well as reforming harmful incentives, such as a cost reduction measure, and increasing financial resources for implementation. All this is driven by engagement, e.g. with indigenous people and particular attention to women and girls.

But you know that unless local conditions are well understood and stakeholders constructively involved, it will be impossible to implement the GBF. The planned, more local MPA could be a part of connecting these realities to global goals and your research needs to provide information, indicators and fair representation of all stakeholders, not only the most influential ones.

You want to make sure that your research responds to questions different stakeholders have and that they do not discard your investigation and result as superfluous luxury of little consequence. You will try to listen particularly carefully to the weaker players in the planning exercise so that they are not being marginalized in the process. You will also try to relate your investigation to the research and monitoring of the natural scientist so that the overall analyses are as robust as possible. You will point out that e.g. most artisanal fishers suffer from procedural injustices that harm their income earning capacities despite having a lower impact on biodiversity and the environment than industrial operations of various kinds. You will support the women's demand for social recognition and access to essential services, from education to health care and pension in their own right and help articulating these basic rights.

You will be careful to avoid jargon and build trust with stakeholders by valuing the experience of various practitioners, thus increasing the chances that the social aspects are taken into account in decision-making processes.