

APAC Workshop

Management Effectiveness Evaluation and standards for Protected Areas

Background

The potential of protected areas as a strategy for nature conservation has been associated to the effectiveness of their management, leading to increasing awareness of the importance of management effectiveness assessments. As a result, in the last decade many evaluation systems have been developed and applied in many countries around the world, based on a set of criteria and indicators of performance, which are rated according to a scoring system where the highest possible score represents the ideal scenario for a given indicator.

Nevertheless, adequate levels of management effectiveness haven't been established by indicator in most of the actual systems. As a result, the ideal scenario works like an implicit standard which is the same for all the protected areas in a system, although the differences in context and objectives of protected areas suggests that the ideal scenario for one protected area is not always suitable for another protected area.

Considering those aspects, it is fair to say that the challenge of reaching a more effective management of protected areas would benefit from setting explicit, adequate and contextualized standards for protected areas management.

The issues involved in the setting of standards were discussed during a workshop in the APAC and the results are presented in the next section.

Discussion

The participants agreed that the issue of defining standards for protected area management is quite complex and this might be the reason why no one has done that yet, although some initiatives point in this direction, such as the Levels of Service and Levels of Protection assessments in Australia. Those systems analyse a set of variables such as integrity, viability, values and threats in order to categorize the protected areas of a system and, based on this, prioritize resources and actions, normally at the state level.

One aspect discussed is that the most important issues for the protected area come out during the planning process, when priorities are defined considering the context. The priorities will be very different between a small park in a remote area and a large urban park, for example. Apart from the management plan, other factors can help setting standards, such as visitor expectations (boundary signs, information on services and trails, etc) and others, e.g. international agreements, cultural site declarations, and threatened species campaigns.

The main question to be answered seems to be: how to compare very different kinds of protected areas and come up with standards which take into account this complexity?

Standards should certainly consider the IUCN categories of protected areas. For example, in the case of National Parks, that allow visitation, a resulting level of disturbance is expected and so the standard for conservation would be a bit lower than the one for conservation parks. Other attributes should also be taken into consideration, such as remoteness, significance, and so many other factors that at the end the standards would have to be decided on almost case by case.

Another question is: what to do once a standard is achieved? Would the standard then be set in a higher level? The group agreed that in this case the idea is to work on improvements in other areas of management.

In the Global scale, initiatives such as IUCN's Green List demand the definition of standards to be used as a criteria to decide if a protected area is well managed or not. In the individual scale, the standards are about establishing where you are, taking steps up the leader, and keep progressing further over time.

It is also important to consider the context and define what is acceptable in it. A simple final score of 100% does not seem to be the answer. For example, there must be a standard for maximum impacts of mountain bikes or how much of the budget can be invested on recreation activities. Having such standards would certainly help educating the public and justifying to visitors why it is not possible to open any more mountain bike trails, because a standard exists for the maximum acceptable level of impact for this park. It would probably be more adequate than the indicator normally used, the "number of visitors", which leads the management to aim for a certain number of visitors. Changing this focus is a challenge, but conservation indicators are also important so the "x" number of visitors have to be accommodated in a protective context.

For example, in Singapore, a long term indicator is used for visitation impact in an urban protected area is "number of falling threes". The participants discussed what would be a good standard for it and concluded that it should be "none". The representative of the park considers that their monitoring experience with this indicator has been bad because it is too quantitative and it takes a long time to show the impacts. The group discussed that the selection of the indicator, which is one step before the setting of standards, should probably be reviewed in this case. In NSW, for example, a more qualitative indicator is used for impacts, which are rated as "diminishing, unchanged or increasing", and, if increasing, the problem is described.

Based on this example, it is possible to understand that the choice of good and meaningful indicators seems like a very important step in the definition of standards. The ideal indicator should give an exact picture of what is happening in reality and be a predictive measure rather than a responsible one. There is also a need for monitoring in a regular basis, in an adequate frequency/period (e.g. five years for species population measurements).

Standards have been used in NSW to categorize their protected areas and support decision making regarding budget. The state has around 700 protected areas and all of them have their own values but the environmental agency has to decide the level of work to be put in each one of them so they're looking to use natural and cultural values in the same fashion that Victoria and South Australia have been doing. The approach of NSW considers aspiration standards but also minimum standards, e.g. the minimum standard for impacts is that they are not increasing.

In Queensland, assessments of protected areas consider three main issues: natural resources management, cultural issues, and presentation values. Those are classified in four categories: outstanding, very high, high, and medium. The state also uses a classification according to the level the site can be developed to, e.g. regarding visitation.

In Tasmania, the protected areas are categorized according to levels of visitation, for example, and the level of facilities required increases with the level of visitation; e.g. in the higher levels, a protected area needs to have facilities for the disabled. Those standards are aspiration standards, what they aim for. They also work aiming for a balance of indicators in the management plan.

One downside of standards is that sometimes the agencies can use it without opening their criteria or results of evaluations to the protected areas and to the public. The agencies, sometimes, prefer do not tell the public about weaknesses in protected areas. Transparency can also be an issue when managers are not given access to the status of their protected area within the system. In Victoria, this issue has been helped by including reporting and standards in their legislation framework, with good results in promoting improvements.

One initiative with good results in transparency and participation is the industry association (Parks Forum) award system for standards. This process can be very positive because it demands discussion, dialogue, and agreements with the head of the agencies. Besides, the approach of working in a broader level helps not to get caught up in individual protected area matters, when trying to define standards.

One participant suggested considering the experience of other agencies in defining standards, such as how hospitals and trains deal with the issue (e.g. train timetable, maximum acceptable delays, how the quality control is done, etc).

Some suggested that the ISO 9000 can be a good starting point when defining standards for protected areas.

Three key points

At the end of the discussions, each group chose the three most relevant aspects regarding standards, as follows:

Group 1

- It is important to associate standards to the IUCN categories and also consider social, outputs and outcomes standards
- It would be important to identify standards during the planning process (i.e. management plan), at least regarding minimum management requirements for the protected area
- Would standards work as an incentive or the opposite way? This risk is an issue that needs attention. To avoid it, there has to be transparency, e.g. the protected area should know their status of management and level of priority in relation to others in the same system (Note: this point refers to the use of standards to classify protected areas within a system by protected area agencies, as it has been used in Australia)

Group 2

- The practical example of Singapore takes us back to the importance of the selection of meaningful indicators before defining standards
- In general, protected area agencies in Australia are working with two kinds of standards: aspiration and minimum
- The need for standards seems to be a progression of the actual work on management effectiveness evaluation so it seems logical that one of the basic standards for protected areas management should be "having a management effectiveness evaluation system in place". This standard would suit all kinds of protected areas.

Group 3

- It is really hard to define standards but it could be helped by looking at experiences in other sectors and agencies, e.g. how the federal government handles the issue of standards in its planning process
- There is some resistance by the protected areas regarding the use of standards and some fear to be held accountable (sometimes without been aware of the criteria) and the risk to be locked to standards and loose lots of intuitive work that is done so it is very important to answer the question: what do we want standards for?
- Transparency is really important regarding standards and their political context and legal requirements. The political context in the agency is not always clear for the protected area so dialogue and agreements are needed in defining and setting standards

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