WHAT IS MARINE SPATIAL PLANNING?

For most Pacific Island Countries, more than 98% of their jurisdiction is ocean. The ocean is vitally important to these countries, providing food and income, coastal protection, carbon storage, and essential habitat for marine plants and animals. Coasts and oceans are heavily intertwined with Pacific Island cultures, traditional knowledge and practices. The economic, social and ecological benefits provided by marine ecosystems are worth billions of dollars to Pacific Island people, annually.

Despite these values, to date, national development and conservation planning in these maritime nations has largely focussed on land. Recent studies, however, show that better planning for oceans can bring significant economic, social and environmental benefits. Marine spatial planning can help Pacific Island Countries realise and maintain these benefits.

Marine spatial planning is most useful if countries want to:

- have (or expect) human activities that adversely affect biodiversity in marine areas;
- have (or expect) incompatible human activities that conflict within marine areas;
- need to decide on what marine spaces are most suitable for new or additional economic development activities such as tourism, deep sea mining or mariculture;
- want to prioritise marine resource management efforts in parts of, or all, marine areas; or
- need a vision or scenarios of what marine areas could or should look like in another 10, 20 or 30 years from now.

Marine spatial planning can help address these issues. It is similar to land-use planning but occurs in the sea. It is one tool in the marine resource management toolbox that also includes input controls (e.g. on fishing effort), process controls (e.g. permits) and output controls (e.g. quotas).

Marine Spatial Planning is an inter-sectoral and participatory planning process and tool that seeks to balance ecological, economic, and social objectives, aiming for sustainable marine resource use and prosperous blue economies.

A marine spatial plan is often an output of the process and distributes human activities in marine areas within spatially and temporally defined zones to achieve identified ecological, economic, cultural and social objectives.
The main steps in marine spatial planning are:

1. Identify the problems or issues that could be addressed
2. Define scope (geographic boundaries, planning timeframes, etc.)
3. Develop stakeholder engagement strategy*
4. Define objectives and performance indicators*
5. Map human uses and ecological information*
6. Map alternative spatial marine plans*
7. Select preferred plan*
8. Implement plan and compliance program simultaneously*
9. Monitor and evaluate performance*
10. Review marine spatial plan within defined timeframe*

* Stages in the marine spatial planning process where stakeholders should be involved

These steps are a summary of the MSP process, while each step comprises more detailed actions and tasks. In addition, implementation of these steps is not a linear process but requires iteration as a continuing MSP cycle.

The concept of marine spatial planning is not new and countries are already applying aspects of marine spatial planning including designated shipping lanes, fishing areas, locally managed marine areas, or marine protected areas (MPAs). However, some of these existing examples of marine spatial planning have, at times, been declared opportunistically without an overarching and integrated planning process. When declared in isolation, individual spatial planning tools may not secure the ecosystem services that people rely on in the medium- and long-term.

More comprehensive and integrated marine spatial planning can support and guide sectoral planning efforts but does not replace sectoral planning. A more holistic marine spatial planning process will reduce the conflicts between different users and uses of the marine environment, while maximizing the social, economic, and ecological benefits we receive from the ocean.

FURTHER READING: www.macbio-pacific.info/marine-spatial-planning