

Not just ecology: testing a comprehensive evaluation framework for MPA's in the Maltese Islands (Central Mediterranean)

Said, A., Attard, A., Deidun, A., Kideys, A.

The designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPA's) has traditionally been led by ecological considerations with very little weight given to social and economic factors. This biologically-oriented MPA designation process has been perceived as a segregating tool for anthropogenic activities, resulting in paper parks. Through research methods applied in sociology, this study attempts to identify a more comprehensive evaluation framework for marine protection using Ċirkewwa, Maltese Islands (central Mediterranean), as a case study. The popular coastal area at Ċirkewwa covers an area of only 180m² and is contested by a number of users. The main contenders are fishermen and divers, with SCUBA diving activities expanding at an increasing rate in the last decades. The SCUBA diving lobby has been pushing for the institution of a Voluntary Marine Reserve (VMS) in the area which was not included in the recent MPA designation exercise conducted by the Maltese authorities. The current management structure of the area has led to an ever-increasing institutional complexity and jurisdictional gaps amongst various entities, resulting in ineffective management and surveillance, and consequently leading to issues such as illegal fishing activities.

The criteria adopted within the comprehensive evaluation framework being proposed through this study include stakeholder issues, education and awareness, marine life and protection, as well as the dynamics of management. In this study, the focus was placed on people's values, perceptions and uses of the marine environment. For example, SCUBA diving may be perceived as encroaching on a previously fished area. This study looks into the issues hindering effective and adaptive management of the area through an analysis of the current situation, and proposes innovative ways how these issues are resolved.