Highlights of an Oak evaluation conducted on marine protected areas

Introduction

A recent evaluation of Oak's support for marine protected areas (MPAs) shows that Oak has helped safeguard an area of ocean the size of the United States and India combined. It is equivalent to nearly 9 per cent of the ocean surface of our blue planet.

This is a result of many years of building strong partnerships and smart, strategic investments which have totalled nearly USD 30 million annually for 15 years. This total comes from a mixture of philanthropic institutions, national, bilateral and multilateral funding.

Oak Foundation was an early investor in the creation and management of coastal MPA networks in places such as Belize. Oak also supported the creation of large pelagic reserves globally. So, to better understand the impact that our grant-making has had, we reviewed our history and reflected on what we have learned, and where we are heading.

The evaluation

To do this, the marine sub-programme commissioned an evaluation of its impact on ocean conservation which was conducted by consultants Mark Valentine and Bernd Cordes. We asked ourselves a fundamental question: how large an area of the ocean have Oak Foundation grantees helped to protect via the creation and enforcement of marine protected areas?

Given the imprecise nature of creating and managing coastal areas — that not all MPAs are designated with the same levels of protection, with some designated as no-take reserves, others only partially closed to fishing and/or other extractive uses – there is no easy answer.

Put simply, not all reserves are created equally.

I t is difficult to determine exactly what impact Oak or its partners have made. For example, in examining the Meso-American Reef (MAR) program, it's clear that some of the grants were tied to specific MPAs, while others were designed to be of regional benefit. Similarly, the Foundation's investments in large, pelagic MPAs were mostly made through intermediaries like Oceans 5, which included substantial funding from other partner donors. Finally, some MPAs are still under development and their final boundaries are yet to be fixed.

However, we concluded that the best approach was to adopt the most expansive geographic parameters, and to focus on those places where the Foundation made substantial contributions to a MPA's creation or improved management (i.e., contribution not attribution).

What we learned

With that in mind, the study estimated that the Foundation's philanthropy has helped to protect approximately 13,254,570 sq km of marine habitat over the past 15-plus years. That's an area roughly equivalent to the territories of the US and India combined. If these areas were contiguous it would be the second largest country in the world after Russia.

Another outcome from the review identified that Oak's support has both conformed to and, in some cases, catalysed new trends in marine conservation philanthropy. And there are two good examples that illustrate this.

In the instance of the Oak Meso-America Reef sub-programme, we chose a region – albeit primarily Belize – rich in biodiversity to expand and strengthen an existing network of MPAs. The early emphasis was on creating co-management agreements with local NGOs and community leaders. This led to a greater emphasis on enforcement, alternative livelihoods, regulation and sustainable financing models – which reflect the global coastal MPA movement. By hiring local staff and committing to long-term engagement, integrating fisheries management and the socioeconomic interests of the regional stakeholders, we followed a formula that, although not unique, could be considered the exception rather than the norm.

In the Arctic, we followed a similar path in terms of dedicated staff and an intensive commitment to a diverse network of partner organisations. However, we embraced a more cross-sector approach where it deliberately supported several different approaches to MPA creation (including the adoption of a broad, flexible definition that encompasses more than strict no-take reserves) and management. This resulted in co-management regimes for critical marine mammal populations that included seasonal closures, as well as closure of the Northern Bering Sea, Beaufort Sea in Canada and Alaska, as well as the Central Arctic Ocean (this last one still in progress) with restrictions on bottom trawling and oil and gas drilling activities.

Our partners

The success of this programme would not have been possible without a rich coalition of partners including International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Conservation International (CI), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the LMMA Network, and BlueVentures.

We have also been joined by major global foundations such Packard, MacArthur, Marisla, the Moore and Walton foundations, and more recently by bi-lateral agencies like US Agency for International Development (USAID) and multi-lateral agencies like the World Bank.

The future

So, as we look to the future, we see a number of opportunities globally. In coastal zones, the countries/regions that stood out are those where there is: strong scientific evidence of high biomass and biodiversity; clear and enforceable resource and property rights; a strong reliance on fish for subsistence and commercial purposes; and credible public commitments to meeting the CBD/Aichi targets.

Those locations include:

- Caribbean: A regional, multi-use MPA effort, not country-by-country, except for in Cuba
- South America: Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Peru
- South and southeast Asia: Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam
- Southeast Africa: Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Tanzania
- Northern Europe: Denmark and Sweden

For offshore pelagic reserves, the selection criteria were similar, with the additional overlay of places where the "rule of law" is strong. The areas include:

- Eastern Pacific: Chile and Colombia
- Southwestern Pacific: Cook Islands, FSM, Guam, Marshall Islands, Niue and Palau;
- French Polynesia
- North-western Pacific: Japan, Taiwan and South Korea
- Indian Ocean: India, South Africa, or any French or British territory located there
- North Atlantic/Arctic: Canada, Greenland, Russia and Norway, or in international waters/high seas