

## **Critical Issues for Marine Conservation Agreements**

Can Marine Conservation Agreements (MCAs) be applied everywhere, at anytime, and under any set of circumstances? Likely not. MCAs are but one tool in the ocean and coastal conservation toolbox. MCAs, government-established marine protected areas, outreach and education, science, best management practices, coastal zone management, zoning, ecosystem-based management, area-wide laws and regulations... these are all different tools that ocean and coastal conservationists can use.

But when is it best to use MCAs as opposed to one or more of the other tools? Are MCAs a “jeweler’s tool” to be used extremely carefully only under precise circumstances? Or are MCAs a “new homeowner’s tool” to be used forcefully under nearly all circumstances? Unfortunately the answer is likely not so clear-cut. There should be, however, a set of critical issues (or criteria) that generally determine when MCAs can be applied. In addition, if critical issues can be established, there may also be a logical progression in which that the resultant criteria should be met.

Can we develop a simplified decision-making checklist for MCAs that satisfies us? Recognizing that site-specific and project-specific circumstances vary widely, fundamental critical issues can augment existing decision-making criteria organizations may already have or can stand alone when other criteria are absent. In general, if potential projects do not address the critical issues and satisfy the resultant criteria, then it is expected that other conservation strategies may be more effective.

For example:

- 1. Can the ecosystem services we’re concerned about be directly or indirectly acquired or managed via MCAs?**
- 2. Can the human and environmental conditions threatening the ecosystem services be directly and indirectly abated via MCAs?**
- 3. Do the legal circumstances provide for the establishment of MCAs?**
- 4. Can the relevant socio-economic factors be understood and accounted for via MCAs?**
- 5. Can we identify and obtain sufficient funding for planning, negotiations, authorization, initiation, and long-term stewardship associated with MCAs?**
- 6. Are organizations and stakeholders who are directly and indirectly impacted by MCAs engaged, supportive, and understanding of the approach?**