

Marine Protected Areas

Assigning IUCN Protected Area Management Categories – The Bahamas Experience

"The process of assigning management categories to our national parks will help facilitate the planning of protected areas and protected area systems managed by BNT and other agencies, improve information management about protected areas and assist to regulate activities within protected areas."

Eric Carey, Executive Director, Bahamas National Trust¹



Participants at the BIOPAMA-facilitated workshops

Credit: Lynn Gape, BNT

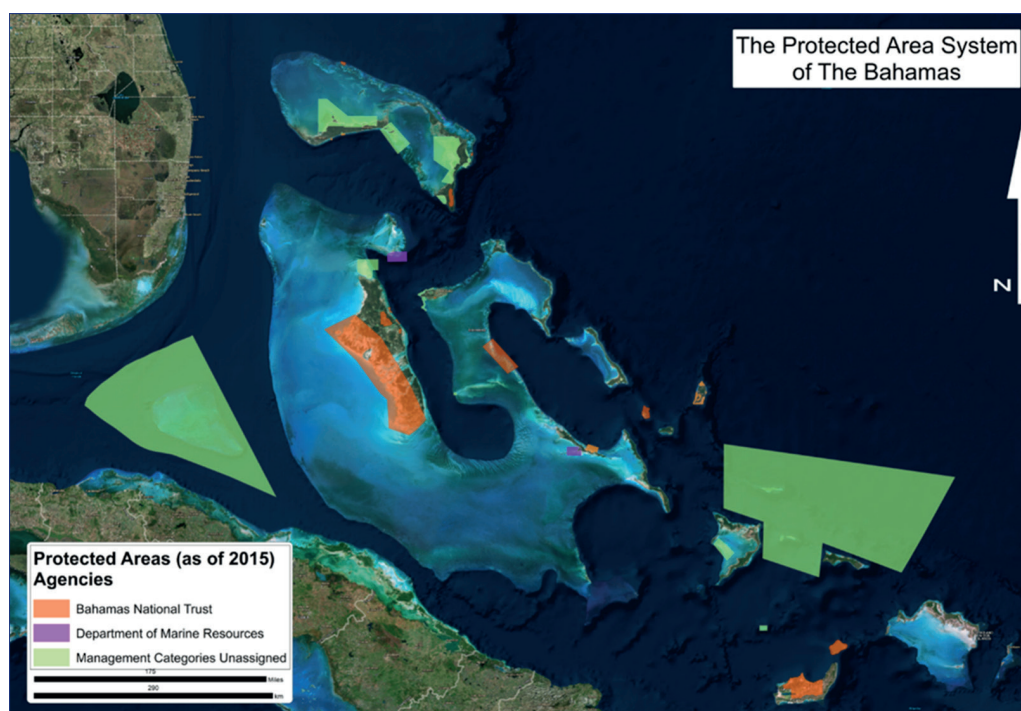
Summary

At its first meeting, the Commonwealth Blue Charter Marine Protected Area (MPA) Action Group identified training on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected area management categories as one of its capacity development needs. Each protected area should be assigned to one of these categories, and governments should provide information on categories when submitting data on protected areas to the World Database of Protected Areas. IUCN

has produced detailed guidance on the categories but there are few documented examples of the assignment process.

As part of the process to improve the management and expansion of The Bahamas MPA network, the Bahamas National Trust (BNT), with the Department of Marine Resources (DMR) and the Clifton Heritage Authority, undertook a process to assign IUCN protected area management categories to all sites under its purview, through a series of workshops in 2014.

¹ <https://www.biopama.org/news/bahamas-moves-to-assign-protected-areas-management-categories52>



Protected areas of The Bahamas (as of 2015)

Credit: Lindy Knowles, BNT

Recommendations for categories for all designated protected areas, including MPAs, were made. This case study explains the purpose of the categories and the assignment process used in The Bahamas. Although the recommendations are still awaiting adoption and formalisation, this initiative provides useful lessons learnt and demonstrates the challenges involved.

The issue

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected area management categories were designed with the aim of providing a tool to help with planning protected area systems; to encourage the development of protected area systems that include a range of conservation objectives tailored to national and local circumstances; to help global and regional data centres collect and report on conservation efforts; and to facilitate comparisons between countries.

The category assigned to a protected area must reflect the primary management objective(s) of the site. A category gives direction to site management and helps ensure that a protected area is designed and managed to meet its intended purpose. For example, if a development such as a tourism operation is proposed for a protected area, its category needs to be considered in case the development will prevent achievement of the protected area objectives. Since each protected area has its own goals and objectives, each site is likely to have a different management strategy, and the category helps ensure appropriate measures are implemented. Without categorisation, management may drift away from the original aim of the site. All the categories are important and a successful protected area network is likely to include sites of different categories.

Assigning categories can be difficult if there are multiple objectives and values for a site, as is often the case, or if the objectives are evolving and complex. IUCN provides guidance on assigning categories for all types of protected areas (Dudley, 2008), as well as specific guidance for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) (Day, 2019), since the marine environment has certain unique characteristics. Both of these documents should be used for MPAs (given that the general guidance explains the key principles underlying the categories).

As part of the national effort to meet its commitments under the Caribbean Challenge Initiative (CCI), the Bahamas National Trust (BNT) decided to assign categories to its protected areas. The CCI was launched in 2008² to promote the protection and management of the marine and coastal environment with a goal of effective management of at least 20 per cent of a country's nearshore and marine environment by 2020. The Bahamas was one of the first governments to participate, signing the Declaration in 2013. The 2012 Master Plan for the Bahamas National Protected Areas System (BNPAS) (Moultrie, 2012) had laid out a process to achieve this, and a series of research programmes and gap analyses were undertaken subsequently.

The Bahamas MPA network, currently covering just over 10 per cent of its territorial waters, has sites ranging from highly protected fishery replenishment areas to marine managed areas with multiple zones that allow varying levels of human interaction and extraction. Four MPAs are marine reserves and are managed by the Department of Marine Resources (DMR); a number are managed by the BNT; and those declared in 2015 have

IUCN category	Definition (as provided in IUCN guidance)	# MPAs
I	<p>Areas strictly set aside to protect biodiversity and also possibly geological/geomorphological features, where human visitation, use and impacts are strictly controlled and limited to ensure protection of the conservation values.</p> <p>The assignment of Category 1 to the flamingo nesting zone in Inagua National Park illustrates that a category can be assigned to a specific part of a protected area if appropriate.</p>	1 + 1 zone
II	<p>Large natural or near-natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, with the species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also allow for environmentally and culturally compatible, spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities.</p> <p>This category was used for most of the larger MPAs within the network; the MPAs assigned to this category demonstrate clearly that assignment is according to the objectives of the protected area, NOT the level of protection – e.g. Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park is fully no-take whereas West Side National Park allows traditional fishing.</p>	6
III	<p>Areas designed to protect a specific natural monument – e.g. landform, sea mount, submarine cavern – or a geological feature such as a cave.</p> <p>This category was assigned to the Lucayan National Park on account of the unusual underwater cave systems found there.</p>	1
IV	<p>Areas designed to protect particular species or habitats.</p> <p>The IUCN guidance points out that it can be difficult to distinguish Category IV from Category II sites: the latter aim to conserve whole ecosystems while the former aim to conserve species or particular fragments of ecosystems: the Pelican Cays Land and Sea Park is recommended as Category IV as it is designed to protect the particularly rich coral reef within it.</p>	6
V	<p>Areas where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value.</p>	0
VI	<p>Areas designed to conserve ecosystems and habitats together with associated cultural values and traditional natural resource management systems; these are generally large, with most of the area in a natural condition, but a proportion under sustainable natural resource management; low-level non-industrial use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims of the area.</p> <p>Bonefish Pond is a good example as it protects an important mangrove area and nursery area for fish, crawfish and conch, and has a major recreational and educational role as the most visited national park on Southern Providence.</p>	7

yet to be assigned a management agency. A three-year project, *Bahamas Protected: Realising the 2020 Goal to Effectively Manage and Expand Bahamian Marine Protected Areas* (Knowles et al., 2017), produced recommendations for 43 new and/or expanded MPAs to meet the 20 per cent area target; the BNT and its partners have submitted these (Anderson et al., 2018) to The Bahamian government and they are currently in the pipeline for approval.

As a component of the overall process, it was decided to assign the IUCN categories to ensure that the protected area system was aligned with international standards. It was also felt that formalised management

categories would help address the increasing trend, in the Caribbean, towards de-gazetting protected areas, a consequence of rapid economic development.

The response

The IUCN guidance was used in designing the categorisation process. Workshops took participants through a sequence of exercises aimed at both ensuring a good understanding of the objectives of each site and building skills in decision-making using the categories. Participants came from all the organisations involved in supporting, establishing and managing protected

areas: BNT, DMR, the Department of Forestry, The Nature Conservancy Bahamas (TNC), The Bahamas Environment Science and Technology Commission, the Antiquities, Monuments and Museums Corporation and Clifton Heritage National Park.

A three-stage process was used, that took place over a nine-month period:

- Workshop 1: Issues identified; management categories and their role as an adaptive tool discussed; context of protected areas reviewed;
- Workshop 2: Issues and context identified in Workshop 1 organised into a conceptual framework;
- Workshop 3: Decisions made on potential categories; future activities identified in terms of requirements for new competencies, capacity and legal processes; process for completion determined.

The last workshop doubled as a knowledge-sharing exercise and had participants from six other Caribbean islands – five Commonwealth countries (Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago) and one other (Dominican Republic).

Partnerships and support

The BNPAS categorisation workshops were undertaken in 2014 and were facilitated and sponsored by the Biodiversity and Protected Areas Management (BIOPAMA) programme, which is an initiative of the Organization of Africa, Caribbean and Pacific States, funded by the European Union under the 10th European Development Fund. IUCN and the European Commission Joint Research Centre implemented the process. Funding totalled about €48,000 and covered IUCN staff time, costs of the workshops, travel, accommodation and per diems.

Results, accomplishments and outcomes

At the final categorisation workshop, agreement was reached on proposed categories for all designated protected areas (BNT, 2014), as shown in Annex 1 and summarised below:

In 2019, the BNT Council, which is a member of IUCN and responsible for this part of the process, approved the recommendations for the proposed categories, which are currently awaiting formalisation and implementation, at which stage the *categories will be reported to the World Database on Protected Areas*. Although the workshop developed a process for classification of new protected areas, categories were not proposed for the MPAs designated in 2015; these sites have not yet been

assigned to a management agency and it is recognised that category assignment is best undertaken in the course of preparing the management plans.

Challenges

COVID-19: The greatest current environmental, as well as economic and social, challenge for The Bahamas, as for most countries, is recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. All countries and MPAs around the world have suffered a massive negative impact. With the cessation of tourism, many sources of income have dried up. MPA managers have had to focus on ensuring the safety and security of their staff. Reduced visitor numbers and disrupted supply chains for fishery products have significantly affected the livelihoods of local communities that may normally both depend on and help manage MPAs. MPA management is focusing down on core operations to maintain basic functioning. However, there is consensus that effectively managed MPAs will be more resilient and that a sustainable managed ocean, encompassing MPA networks of adequate size, will be an essential component of recovery. This pandemic, combined with the devastation to the northern Bahama islands by Hurricane Dorian in 2019, has left the country in a position where unfortunately environmental considerations are a lower priority than the environment.

The workshop participants found that some concepts behind the categorisation process were complex, and that, despite the IUCN guidance, definitions and terms were not necessarily easily understood. The technical advice and training provided by BIOPAMA was therefore invaluable. Training was needed for managers, wardens/rangers, fisheries superintendents and others involved in the assignment process and tasked with subsequently interpreting the categories for other stakeholders.

The stakeholder engagement and workshop process needs careful design and facilitation to ensure that developers, investors and others with a vested interest do not influence the assignment process and reduce the level of ambition at a site for biodiversity protection.

As IUCN categories are assigned according to the objectives of a protected area; they do not necessarily reflect the name of the site or level of protection. This is clearly demonstrated by this example for The Bahamas, where most MPAs are called either national parks (used in the IUCN guidance for Category II sites) or marine reserves (Category I sites in the IUCN Guidance). The BNT plans to retain the current branding of national

parks and on-going marketing approaches, thus clear explanations of Categories I and II sites will be needed. This issue of terminology will also need to be addressed as the proposed new MPAs are designated.

The other Commonwealth countries that participated in the final workshop have also had difficulties assigning categories and have found the process challenging. Categories have been assigned to all the sites in the Saint Lucia national protected area systems plan, but legislation to formalise this has not been implemented, and the other countries have not yet completed the process.

Key lessons learnt

The Bahamas process has validated much of the guidance provided for assigning the IUCN protected area management categories in terms of:

- The need to involve key stakeholders, and base the assessment on best available natural and social science. The three workshops were designed to ensure enough time for assimilation of information and also to facilitate the research and analysis required.
- The need to carefully assess the MPA objectives before assigning a IUCN category; this has additional value in that it can help with development or revision of a management plan and identification of appropriate management measures for a site.

As is recognised widely, the management categories are primarily a tool for protected area management agencies and the international conservation community, to help focus on objectives and to develop well-balanced frameworks for MPA systems. They do not lend themselves very well to use in external communications – a problem identified in many countries – except perhaps where they could help explain regulations and management interventions for a particular site.

Given this challenge, workshop participants discussed the possibility of creating new categories specifically for The Bahamas. In fact, this issue had been addressed, and resolved, previously. In the 1980s, when the protected area system was being expanded in The Bahamas, three broad categories were adopted: national park, protected area and national reserve. Over time, these names started to determine which agency managed a site, rather than the objectives of the site. A widely understood national “branding” for protected areas thus became established, as happens in many countries. However, the value of adopting the IUCN categories was also understood, since it provides a mechanism to align protected areas with international standards. It was nevertheless considered important to retain the existing naming system and so the management category, once agreed, is placed in brackets after the protected area name. Thus, for example, “national parks” in The Bahamas are those sites managed by the BNT but they have a variety of objectives that are reflected in their categories that help determine management.

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Annex 1. MPAs of The Bahamas (as at March 2019)

Name	Island	Date established	Proposed IUCN category	Size (acres)	Managed by
Little Inagua National Park	Inagua	2002	Ib	62,800	BNT
Inagua National Park	Inagua	1965	I/II	220,000	BNT
Andros West Side National Park	Andros	2002/2012	VI	1,500,000	BNT
Conception Island National Park	Conception Island	1971/2012	II	30,000	BNT
Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park	Exuma	1958	II	174,194	BNT
Moriah Harbour Cay National Park	Exuma	2002/2015	II	22,833	BNT
Exuma (Jewfish Cay) Marine Reserve	Exuma		II	37,165	DMR
Lucayan National Park	Grand Bahama	1982/2015	III	1,937	BNT
Fowl Cays National Park	Abaco	2009	IV	3,200	BNT
Peterson Cay National Park	Grand Bahama	1968/2015	IV	1,090	BNT
Union Creek Reserve	Inagua	1965	IV	6,150	BNT
Black Sound Cay National Park	Abaco	1988	IV	2	BNT
Pelican Cays Land and Sea Park	Abaco	1972	IV	2,100	BNT
No Name Cay Marine Reserve	Abaco		IV	1,210	DMR
Walker's Cay National Park	Abaco	2002	IV	5,800	BNT
Andros Crab Replenishment Reserve	Andros	2002	VI	4,000	BNT
Andros North Marine Park	Andros	2002	VI	5,000	BNT
Andros South Marine Park	Andros	2002	VI	3,500	BNT
Bonefish Pond National Park	New Providence	2002	VI	1,235	BNT
Crab Cay Marine Reserve	Abaco		VI	1,075	DMR
South Berry Islands Marine Reserve	Berry Islands		VI	63,002	DMR
Graham's Harbour Iguana & Seabird National park	San Salvador	2015		5723	BNT
West Coast Marine Park	San Salvador	2015		10,313	BNT
Pigeon Creek and Snow Bay National Park	San Salvador	2015		5,060	BNT
Green's Bay National Park	San Salvador	2015		586	BNT

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