



## Book Review

### Conserving the oceans: the politics of large marine protected areas

By Justin Alger

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It has been estimated that the world's oceans contain somewhere between 500 000 and 10 million species of marine life of which over 90% have yet to be classified (United Nations 2017). Furthermore, an estimated more than 80% of the oceans are unexplored and unmapped and thus are unobserved and unevaluated by conservationists (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2021). Scientists agree that biodiversity is a major factor that determines the long-term stability of marine ecosystems but is threatened primarily by anthropogenic activities. To limit and/or recover from ocean life disturbances, several efforts have been undertaken to conserve marine biodiversity. Among those is the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which can be considered a type of marine spatial planning strategy and tool to protect species, habitats and ecosystems from harmful human activities (Cashion *et al.* 2020). MPAs vary in shape and size with some exceeding 100 000 km<sup>2</sup>, known as large-scale (LS) MPAs. As Gallagher *et al.* (2020) pointed out, LSMPAs 'seek to protect and connect large pelagic ecosystems, enhance ecological processes, and promote socioeconomic benefits including sustainable fisheries' (p. 749).

I recently came across an interesting book by Alger (2021) who analysed three LSMPAs larger than 200 000 km<sup>2</sup>: (1) The Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument (PRIMNM) in the United States; (2) the Coral Sea Marine Park (CSMP) in Australia; and (3) the Palau National Marine Sanctuary (PNMS) in the Republic of Palau. His case-study-based approach, which draws from interviews with 74 key LSMPA stakeholders and experts, is an attempt to find explanations for differences in industry influence over marine conservation policy decisions.

In the first chapter, Alger (2021) introduces the reader to the development, pace, scale and trends of global marine conservation efforts. He defines terms such as norm

adoption (i.e. the spread of a norm to new jurisdictions) and norm localisation (i.e. the characteristics of a new norm at a different place influenced by local customs and practises). He explains that these are two synchronous processes that can lead to norm diffusion (i.e. the process of international and domestic engagement with a new norm). The 'norm diffusion model' is used as a framework throughout the book to deconstruct industry influence and stakeholder behaviour in the three LSMPAs mentioned above.

The following sections are divided into two parts: 'The Norm of Large Marine Protected Areas' (Part I with Chapters 2 and 3) and 'The Politics of Conservation Campaigns' (Part II with Chapters 4–7). Alger (2021) explains in the second chapter how and why LSMPAs have emerged as a new norm in global marine conservation and discusses the four major actors (i.e. state leaders, industry, environmental groups and local communities) who participate in LSMPA norm creation. Sometimes, non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) play a role in marine conservation efforts as well.

Alger (2021) describes in Chapter 3 how stakeholder coalitions form around a given MPA based on the salience of various industry interests in a particular region. He mentions the indicators (i.e. intensity of activity, factor specificity, asset specificity and exogenous stressors) that determine the level of industry influence over government policy. He outlines the roles and expectations of the stakeholder groups as well as the steps in the coalition-forming process which provides the basis for interpreting the dynamics observed in the following three case studies.

The first of the three case studies is presented in Chapter 4. Alger (2021) mentions that PRIMNM was established by U.S. president Bush in 2009 and expanded by U.S. president Barack Obama in 2014 from its original size of 225 000 km<sup>2</sup> to 1 270 000 km<sup>2</sup>. In both instances, government leaders used

the 1906 Antiquities Act, which is an executive action granted to the president to establish/expand a national monument (National Park Service 2021). In the PRIMNM case, a combination of scientific reporting to justify an increase of the monument, aggressive lobbying by environmental groups and efforts to rally community support made the expansion politically popular. Thus, industry's bargaining position was weak because industry was unable to demonstrate high interest salience (i.e. it had minimal commercial interests) in the remote regions of the Pacific islands and was unable to inhibit the coalition-building process between the state, environmental groups and the public.

Chapter 5 is about the marine park in the Australian Coral Sea. Alger (2021) points out that this 990 000 km<sup>2</sup> CSMP became the battlefield between various stakeholders during a period of political uncertainty in Australia with five different prime ministers and coalition governments between the years 2013 and 2018. Here, the political economy of industry interests in the Coral Sea led to a pattern of norm diffusion that can be characterised by close state-industry collaboration which undermined Australia's conservation efforts to establish LSMPAs. Several plans to protect large ocean spaces were debated among the stakeholders, including zoning and rezoning, and no-take versus mixed-use. There were phases of conservation success and phases of industry 'business-as-usual' activities. Alger (2021) describes the exhaustive scientific and socioeconomic investigations, the seemingly endless proposal submissions, the drafting of various management plans, and the government's extensive public consultations that ultimately made the CSMP an example of a 'paper park' (i.e. an environmental conservation area that essentially only exist on paper and is not sufficiently bound to conservation laws and enforcement).

Alger (2021) describes in the sixth chapter the development of the PNMS – a 475 077 km<sup>2</sup> marine reserve in Palau that was advocated by its president, Tommy Remengesau Jr., and approved by congress in 2015. The fact that Palau's economy is highly dependent on its ecotourism industry and that the commercial (tuna) fishing industry is primarily owned by foreign countries made PNMS an interesting case study for a government's attempt to conserve marine biodiversity, protect Palau's ecotourism sector (a world-class dive destination) and reform its domestic commercial fishing fleet to serve Palau's domestic needs. Alger (2021) describes that this case does not reveal the typical balancing act between stakeholders but is rather an example of norm diffusion in which economic policy and conservation policy overlap. Furthermore, he believes that the successful establishment of the PNMS is 'the first clear instance of a state pursuing an MPA of its own volition, absent an advocacy campaign to persuade it' (p. 157).

The final chapter (Chapter 7) includes a discussion about whether LSMPAs are a desirable solution to deal with ocean biodiversity decline. Alger (2021) describes the benefits and shortcomings of LSMPAs and summarises

the major findings of his research. He points out that despite the observed differences in the three LSMPAs studied, the LSMPA norm represents a significant paradigm shift in marine conservation and changed the scale of what states now imagine and can do for the protection of marine biodiversity.

The book by Alger (2021) is a timely publication because of the increasing public interest in wildlife conservation and the ongoing complex debates among stakeholders about the location, size, range and type, as well as costs, jurisdiction, policy interactions, management, effectiveness and sustainability of MPAs and LSMPAs (see e.g. Pendleton *et al.* 2018; Gruby *et al.* 2021; Kriegl *et al.* 2021). The information contained in the author's text clearly adds to this debate. The book is impressive in theoretical ideas, the selection of cases and the interpretation of research data. It is to the best of my knowledge the most comprehensive and research-driven book on this subject matter to date.

The choice of using a three-case-study approach works well because it allows Alger (2021) to clearly demonstrate the differences in the behaviour of stakeholders who engage in the quest to develop and implement environmental policies. The methods section is well presented, and he sufficiently describes why a case study approach with purposive sampling, interviewing and process-tracing is the most suitable qualitative research design.

I like that Alger (2021) includes an Appendix with a list of interviewees that come from civil society, the ecotourism and fishing industry, government and research organisations. I also like that he embeds into the text on several occasions the interviewees' own words (e.g. a campaigner said: 'MPAs are not fisheries management tools; they are conservation management tools' [p. 123]). The use of such quotations not only honours participants' own words but also helps readers understand the personal point(s) of view(s) of stakeholders and experts.

The book also contains notes, a list of references and a functional index. However, there is no glossary of the numerous terms used throughout the book. Since environmental conservation is conducted in an interdisciplinary and international manner, a carefully developed glossary would be beneficial to readers from different fields, education levels and cultural/language backgrounds. The tables, graphs and illustrations are well selected, sufficient in number and appropriately placed in the chapters.

I predict that the book by Alger (2021) will attract great interest from scholars of global environmental governance and conservation politics, from financial advisors, lawyers, lobbyists, campaign strategists and members of NGOs, as well as from practitioners working in marine fisheries, ecotourism and conservation. Furthermore, students and academics alike will appreciate this research-based, informative, thought-provoking and interesting book. I highly recommend it to the reader.

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**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares no conflicts of interest.