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Planning for action: Bridging the gap between systematic conservation planning and conservation action

Thesis submitted by
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Bachelor of Marine Studies (Hons) University of Queensland

in September 2011

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies
James Cook University



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Signature, Morena Mills

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Statement on the contribution of others

- Research funding:** Australian National Network in Marine Science
- Stipend:** Australian Postgraduate Award
International Postgraduate Research Scholarship
- In-kind funding:** Wildlife Conservation Society
- Supervision:** Prof. Robert L. Pressey
- Co-Supervision:** Dr. Natalie C. Ban
Dr. Simon Foale
Dr. Andrew T. Knight
- Statistical, analytical and modelling support:**
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- Editorial support:** Robert L. Pressey (whole thesis)
Natalie C. Ban (whole thesis)
Simon Foale (Chapter 1, 2, 5 & 6)
Andrew T. Knight (Chapter 1 & 5)
Rebecca Weeks (Chapter 2)
Stacy D. Jupiter (Chapter 3 & 4)
Vanessa M. Adams (Chapter 4)
Shankar Aswani (Chapter 5)
James Comley (Chapter 2)

Acknowledgements

I owe the deepest gratitude to my supervisors Bob Pressey, Natalie Ban, Simon Foale and Andrew Knight for being generous with their time and providing me with support throughout my thesis. I want to thank Bob for showing me that good quality research can be undertaken at the same time as achieving real conservation outcomes. Thank you for allowing me to pursue research questions that I am passionate about and for so many hours of great discussion and brainstorming. I also want to thank Natalie for endless support with my writing, prompt feedback and friendship throughout the last three years. You helped make a challenging thesis achievable and fun. Simon, thank you for always encouraging me to always see the bigger picture and for your endless passion for culture and the environment. Andrew, thank you for all the moral support, skype chats, always challenging me to think harder about my research and inspiring me to ensure that my research is useful for undertaking day-to-day conservation decisions.

My research would have not have been possible without the collaboration and support of conservation agencies. Stacy Jupiter, thank you for all you hard work helping me make my work relevant in Fiji. I am both humbled and proud to have worked in collaboration with the Protected Area Committee and Wildlife Conservation Society and have been able to inform inshore marine conservation in Fiji during my thesis. Shankar Aswani and the Roviana and Vonavona Lagoon Marine Resource Management team, thank you for your support throughout my field work in the Solomon Islands. It would have been impossible for me to do all that work without your assistance.

Financial and in-kind support was key to undertaking this thesis and presenting my research in multiple conferences. I received this support from the Wildlife Conservation Society, Australian National Network in Marine Science, James Cook University's Graduate Research School, the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and the Society for Conservation Biology.

Thanks to my research assistants in the Solomon Islands and Fiji, Preetika, Selina, Edwin and Jacque. Your help was invaluable and you made the fieldwork thoroughly enjoyable. Thank you so much for all your hard work!

Thank you to all my interviewees and workshop participants in Fiji and Solomon Islands. You were very generous with your time and patience and helped me understand a great deal more about my study regions.

Thanks to all the wonderful friends I made in Townsville. A special thanks to Jorge Alvarez-Romero, Vanessa Adams, Piero Visconti, Madeline Bottrill, Rebecca Weeks, Philippa Cohen, Christina Hicks, Johnathan Kool, Mariana Fuentes, Duan Biggs, Stephen Ban, Tom Brewer, Alana Grech, Stephanie Januchowski-Hartley, Milena Kim, April Reside, Hugo Harrison, Jean-Baptiste Raina, Alex Anderson and Tatjana Good. Your friendship and support made my thesis and life richer and a lot more fun. Good luck on your next adventures and I'll miss you all.

Finally, thanks to my family and friends for always believing in me and supporting me throughout my thesis. Mum, Dad, Euan, Andy, Vovó, Nii, Jô, Sô and Mandinha, thanks for your love and always making me smile – you kept me sane and happy.

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Publications associated with thesis

Peer reviewed

Mills M., Jupiter S.D., Pressey R.L., Ban N.C. and Comley J. Assessing effectiveness of community-based management strategies towards achieving national biodiversity targets: A new approach for marine conservation in Fiji. *Conservation Biology*. In Press.

Mills M., Weeks R., Pressey R.L., Foale S. and Ban N.C. 2010. A mismatch of scales: challenges in planning for implementation of marine protected areas in the Coral Triangle. *Conservation Letters* **3**, 291-303.

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Mills M., Adams V., Ban N., Jupiter S.D. and Pressey R.L. Where do regional and local conservation actions meet? Simulating the expansion of opportunistic and systematic approaches to conservation into the future. *Conservation Letters*. In review.

Mills M., Pressey R.L., Foale S., Knight A.T., Ban N.C. and Aswani S. Defining Conservation Opportunity in a Common Pool Marine Resource Governance System in the Solomon Islands. *Conservation Letters*. In review.

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Kool J., Brewer T., **Mills M.** and Pressey R.L. 2010. Ridges to Reefs Conservation Plan for the Solomon Islands. ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, Townsville, Australia.

Conference presentations

International Marine Conservation Congress 2 May 2011, Canada

Mills M., Pressey R.L., Knight A.T., Foale S., Ban N.C. and Aswani S. First steps to planning with opportunity: Defining conservation opportunity in a common pool marine resource governance system in the Solomon Islands (oral presentation).

Mills M., Adams V., Pressey R.L., Ban N. and Jupiter S.D. Where do regional and local conservation actions meet? Modelling the differences between local implementation and regional conservation planning in Fiji (oral presentation).

Pressey R.L., **Mills M.** and Weeks R. Scaling up and down for effective MPAs: conceptual, technical, policy and institutional implications (oral presentation).

Kool J., Brewer T., **Mills M.**, and Pressey R.L. Ridges to Reefs Conservation Planning for Solomon Islands (oral presentation).

International Congress for Conservation Biology July 2010, Canada

Mills M., Adams V.M., Jupiter S.D., Pressey R.L., Ban N.C. and Singh P. Planning for action: Tackling the mismatch of scales between regional planning and local implementation in Fiji (poster).

Fiji Island Conservation Science Forum August 2009, Fiji

Mills M., Pressey R.L. and Jupiter, S.D. Tackling the mismatch of scales between regional planning and local implementation in Fiji (oral presentation).

12th Meeting of the Pacific Islands Roundtable for Nature Conservation, Apia, Samoa, 5-9 July 2010.

Jupiter S.D., **Mills M.**, Comley J., Batibasaga A. and Jenkins A. Making community conserved areas count towards national biodiversity conservation targets: A new approach for marine ecological gap analysis in Fiji (oral presentation).

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Mills M., Pressey R.L., Knight A.T. and Foale S. Integrating social opportunities and constraints for conservation action into conservation planning (oral presentation).

11th Pacific Science Intercongress March 2009, Tahiti

Pressey R.L., **Mills M.** and Weeks R. Turning plans into reality: bridging the gap between region-scale conservation designs and local-scale implementation in the Asia-Pacific region (oral presentation).

Other publications generated during my candidature

Peer Reviewed

Ban N.C., Januchowski-Hartley S., Alvarez-Romero J., **Mills M.**, Pressey R.L., Linke S. and de Freitas D. Marine and freshwater conservation planning: from representation to persistence. In: *Shaping the Future: Conservation Planning from the bottom up - a practical guide for the 21st century* (Eds. Craighead L & Convis C). ESRI Press Redlands, California. Accepted.

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International Marine Conservation Congress 2 May 2011, Canada

Adams V.M., **Mills M.**, Jupiter S.D., Pressey R.L. Improving social acceptability of marine protected area networks: a method for estimating opportunity costs to multiple gear types (oral presentation).

10th International Congress of Ecology, INTECOL, August 2009, Australia

Adams V.M., **Mills M.**, Jupiter S.D. and Pressey R.L. Marine opportunity costs: a method for calculating opportunity costs for multiple stakeholder groups (oral presentation).

The 2010 International Meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation, Bali, Indonesia, July 19-23, 2010.

Pressey R.L., Almany G.R., Alvarez-Romero J., Ban N.C., de Freitas D, Horigue V., Kool J., **Mills M.** and Weeks R. New directions for marine planning in the Coral Triangle: patch dynamics, connectivity, catchment management, and applying local-scale actions (oral presentation).

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Adams V.M., **Mills M.**, Jupiter S.D. and Pressey R.L. Marine opportunity costs: a method for calculating opportunity costs for multiple stakeholder groups (oral presentation).

Abstract

To halt the decline of marine biodiversity, networks of interacting marine protected areas (MPAs) – intertidal and subtidal areas “reserved by law or other effective means to protect part or all of the enclosed environment” (Kelleher 1999) – need to be expanded. Systematic conservation planning (hereafter ‘systematic planning’) offers a way forward with its explicit methods for locating and designing resource management (hereafter ‘management’) in time and space to promote the conservation of biodiversity (Margules and Pressey 2000). The implementation of systematically planned MPA networks has been demonstrated in some regions. However, numerous challenges (e.g. understanding the willingness of people to engage in conservation) impede translations of many spatial prioritisations into management. Spatial prioritisations are the technical activities within systematic planning that identify the configuration of priority areas for conservation action. Conservation actions are interventions that contribute to conservation goals (e.g. establishing education programs or management) (Salafsky et al. 2008). The failure of many spatial prioritisations to motivate conservation action is referred to as the knowing-doing gap.

The conservation biology literature contains a heated discussion about the best investment of conservation resources, leading to a polarization between systematic planning and opportunistic conservation – conservation that takes advantage of opportunities without considering spatial context or regional conservation goals. Although it can be useful to polarize these perspectives to better understand their respective strengths and limitations, academics and resource managers are now exploring how they can be made complementary. Opportunistic conservation actions can be ‘scaled up’ to better achieve fisheries and conservation objectives that require perspectives broader than individual local governance units. At the same time, spatial prioritisations must be ‘scaled down’ or adapted to better inform implementation of conservation actions by incorporating local objectives, unforeseen constraints on conservation actions, and errors in data. The goal of this thesis is to better

understand options for integrating systematic planning with local management. With this goal in mind, my thesis has two main objectives:

1. To investigate methods for scaling down systematic planning to inform conservation actions, focusing on opportunities for implementing multiple forms of management with different contributions to conservation goals; and
2. To explore considerations for scaling up conservation actions to achieve regional conservation goals.

To achieve these objectives, first I examine the mismatch of spatial scales between systematic planning and conservation actions. I review key decisions about spatial scale in systematic planning, and the considerations and implications of these key decisions for informing conservation actions (Chapter 2). In Chapter 2, I develop a framework in which decisions about spatial scale can be made explicit, investigated further, and potentially addressed during systematic planning. In this framework, I identify five decisions about spatial scale: extent and delineation of the planning region, resolution of data, size and delineation of planning units, MPA network design, and applying conservation actions. Each of these decisions involves several considerations, including the extent of available data, extent of bioregions, and social, economic and ecological characteristics of study areas. My framework helps to link theory and application in systematic planning, facilitates learning, and promotes the application of conservation actions that are both regionally and locally significant.

To scale up conservation actions or scale down systematic plans, the differential contributions of several forms of management (e.g. permanent and temporary closures to resource extraction) to conservation goals must be understood, so I develop a method to do so (Chapter 3). Using Fiji as a case study, I gather expert knowledge through dialectic inquiry to obtain perceived effectiveness scores for four forms of management, and use these in a national gap analysis. Permanent closures were the benchmark with an ecological effectiveness score of 1.0. Temporary closures with controlled harvesting had relatively high scores and temporary closures with

uncontrolled harvesting and 'other management' had relatively low scores. Understanding the relative contribution of different forms of management to conservation goals facilitates scaling up and down in three ways: (1) forms of management that complement each other in terms of the level of protection they offer and their social acceptability can be identified; (2) conservation achievements in countries where multiple forms of management will be needed to achieve national conservation goals can be assessed; and (3) spatial prioritisations can be tailored to management that is relevant within the ecological, social, economic and political context of the selected planning regions.

To contribute to existing knowledge on opportunities for implementing multiple forms of management, I develop a method to model conservation opportunity at fine resolution for different forms of management (Chapter 4). I also develop an approach to investigate the social characteristics of villages with different forms of management, thereby providing insights into conservation opportunity (Chapter 5).

In Chapter 4, I use key informant interviews and remotely collected data, and model conservation opportunity for different forms of management at regional scales using Maxent. This model provides information on the relative suitability of one area for a particular form of management. I find that two of the most important predictors of suitability for the different forms of management are distance from the nearest road and proportion of inshore fishing ground already closed. This approach is promising, because it produces good fits to the existing data (cross-validated AUC at least 0.98). It also provides insight into the factors influencing the presence and characteristics of different forms of management, and matches accounts in the literature on factors important to establishing closures.

In Chapter 5, I use the social-ecological systems diagnostic framework, and compare the performance of data at different resolutions for informing conservation opportunity. Even though conservation opportunity is context-specific, using a well-recognized diagnostic framework allows identification of

characteristics that lead to effective governance within different contexts. I use canonical correspondence analysis to examine the association between the presence and form of management on one hand and, on the other, human and social characteristics of villages. I find that, in the Solomon Islands, human and social characteristics that influence the presence and absence of management can be more easily differentiated than those related to different forms of management. Furthermore, I find that household-scale data are more effective than village-scale data at identifying the human and social characteristics associated with management. Understanding these characteristics and mapping conservation opportunity facilitate the scaling down of systematic plans by informing planners of priorities for feasible forms of management within a social-ecological system.

To further explore considerations for scaling up conservation actions to achieve regional conservation goals (objective 2), the conservation opportunity model developed in Chapter 4 is used as the basis for comparing systematic planning and opportunistic approaches to conservation. I carry out 10-year simulations of additional conservation actions with systematic planning and opportunistic conservation approaches, identifying the difference between the upper and lower bounds of plausible future conservation achievements (Chapter 4). To predict future conservation action, I use data on conservation opportunity (Maxent suitability model), established MPAs, key informant interviews, and Marxan with Zones (systematic planning software). The opportunistic approach achieves quantitative conservation objectives for half the ecosystems, while all objectives are achieved or nearly achieved with the systematic planning approach. Chapter 4 informs policy makers about what incentives and regulations are needed to steer Fiji toward achieving national conservation goals into the future.

My thesis contributes to the theoretical advancement of the field of conservation biology by investigating the results of different approaches to conservation (i.e., systematic planning and opportunistic approaches) and developing methods that help integrate them. Chapter 2 informs both scaling up and scaling down by identifying the considerations needed and the trade-

offs between considerations when making decisions about spatial scale. Chapter 3 provides a method to understand the differential effectiveness of management and integrates this understanding into a national gap analysis, which facilitates scaling down of outputs from systematic plans by tailoring them to specific regions. Understanding differential effectiveness also helps to scale up management by informing decision makers about complementary forms of management. Together, chapters 4 and 5 provide methods to understand opportunity for conservation. This is critical if spatial prioritisations are to identify priority areas that are most likely to be implemented, thereby facilitating the scaling down of systematic plans. Lastly, Chapter 4 also demonstrates a method to understand the benefits of coordinating opportunistic management to facilitate the development of policies and incentives.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Bioregions	Areas with relatively homogeneous biological and physical composition, distinct from adjacent regions and large enough to ecological and evolutionary processes (Spalding et al 2007).
Conservation actions	Interventions that contribute to conservation goals (e.g. establishing education programs or management) (Salafsky et al. 2008).
Conservation objectives	Quantitative interpretations of the broader goals of planning
Ecological effectiveness	The relative contribution of a form of management to realizing conservation objectives.
Implementation strategy	The development of a plan of how spatial prioritisations are going to inform management (Knight et al. 2006b).
Knowing-doing gap	The difference between the number of spatial prioritisations produced and the number that actively informs management. The knowing doing gap is composed of the research-implementation and the planning-implementation gap.
Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA)	An area of inshore waters governed by local residents and involving a collective understanding of, and commitment to, management interventions in response to threats to marine resources. In terms of management it is equivalent to an MPA.
Management effectiveness	The feasibility of a management approach for a particular biological, social and economic context, and its ability to promote the persistence of all levels of biodiversity (based on Hockings et al 2006).
Marine protected area (MPA)	"Any area of intertidal or subtidal terrain, together with its overlying water and associated flora, fauna, historical and cultural features, which has been reserved by law or other effective means to protect part or all of the enclosed environment" (Kelleher 1999).
Marine protected area networks (MPA networks)	"A collection of individual marine protected areas operating cooperatively and synergistically ...to fulfil ecological aims more effectively and comprehensively than individual sites alone could" (WCPA/IUCN 2007).
Opportunistic conservation	Conservation that takes advantage of opportunities without considering spatial context or regional conservation goals.
Permanent closure	Areas where the extraction of resources is prohibited indefinitely (a.k.a. no-take areas, marine reserves).

Planning units	Spatial units of assessment and comparison used in most planning exercises that employ decision-support software and are the building blocks of regional MPA designs.
Planning region	The geographic domain within which areas are evaluated and compared as candidates for conservation action.
Protected areas	Areas “designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives” (CBD 2008).
Resource management (management)	Any action directed at protecting, enhancing or restoring species and ecosystems.
Regional priorities	Areas identified for generic or specific conservation actions during regional scale design.
Regional scale	An area which shares common “patterns and processes of biodiversity and human uses” (Pressey and Bottrill 2009).
Spatial scale (scale)	The extent and resolution of study regions, data, and areas of assessment.
Spatial prioritisation	The “technical activities that identify the location and configuration of priority areas for conservation action” (Knight et al. 2006b).
Systematic conservation planning (systematic planning)	An explicit operational model for locating, designing and implementing conservation actions in time and space to promote the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources (Margules and Pressey 2000).
Temporary closure	Areas where the extraction of resources is prohibited temporarily. These can be ‘controlled’, where harvests are allowed once per year as dictated by a management plan or collective decision at the community level; or, uncontrolled, where areas are harvested without any predefined frequency and duration.