



Best Practices for MPA Stakeholder Consultation in The Bahamas

By: Organization for Responsible Governance

Purpose: To build legitimacy, trust, and sustained compliance for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) by meaningfully engaging communities as active partners throughout the identification, designation, and long-term management process. This approach seeks to ensure that conservation decisions are informed by local knowledge, responsive to community priorities, and grounded in transparency and accountability. By using engagement methods that reflect Bahamian social, cultural, and economic realities, the process aims to foster shared ownership of marine resources, strengthen public confidence in conservation institutions, and support the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of MPAs.

1) Start with trust repair, not “data extraction.”

- Start with trust repair, not “data extraction.” Name the trust deficit up front and acknowledge past experiences of “top-down” decisions, inconsistent outreach, and limited follow-through, while signaling a clear commitment to a more collaborative and transparent process.
- Be explicit and transparent about what will happen with input. Clearly outline what aspects of the process can change, what cannot, and why. Providing this clarity early helps manage expectations and reduces the likelihood of frustration or opposition over time.
- Show visible impact early (“small wins”). Demonstrate that consultation is real and not performative by highlighting early actions or adjustments that reflect community feedback and signal that participation is shaping the process.

2) Design consultation around Bahamian communication norms

- Lead with in-person engagement. Prioritize town halls and small-group sessions, supported by WhatsApp and trusted community channels (e.g., churches, schools) that can be recommended by locals that understand the context of your engagement, to ensure accessibility and inclusivity.
- Use “safe, respectful spaces” for dialogue. Create environments where grievances can be voiced, misinformation corrected, and practical issues like unclear boundaries or enforcement concerns can be openly discussed and addressed.
- Plan around local rhythms and contexts. Schedule engagement activities around fishing seasons, cultural calendars, and other community priorities, tailoring approaches island-by-island, recognizing that there is no “one size fits all” solution.



3) Engage early and continuously across the full MPA lifecycle

- Use a phased approach that includes *planning, designation, and ongoing management*, not one-off meetings.
- Adopt a collaborative participation model: multi-directional exchange among community members, scientists, managers, and decision-makers; adapt methods over time based on feedback.

4) Make roles, representation, and influence real

- Create clear structures so fishers have ongoing representation (advisory groups/ambassadors) with specific, time-bound objectives, not vague mandates.
- Use Partnership/Management Forums to co-create priorities, identify co-management opportunities, and produce a practical community action plan.
- Ensure participants have a credible ability to influence outcomes, not just provide comments.

5) Center the issues communities raise most often

Build consultation agendas around the recurring drivers of resistance and low buy-in:

- Boundary clarity + rules + rationale (visual maps, signage, plain-language explanations).
- Fairness and equity in enforcement, especially perceptions that locals are targeted while larger/foreign actors face less scrutiny.
- Livelihood impacts and trade-offs, with practical options to reduce harm and build shared stewardship.
- Local ecological knowledge (LEK) as an asset for adaptive management and monitoring.

6) Facilitate for problem-solving, not forced consensus

- Facilitate but don't control; allow disagreement to generate better solutions and reduce "hard feelings."
- Use consensus appropriately: it works best when issues are negotiable, time/resources exist, and no single actor controls the solution.
- Consider trained/neutral facilitation support for complex or polarized contexts.

7) Close the loop with documented "you said / we did"

- Share preliminary survey/focus group findings back to communities for validation before using them for decisions or public products.
- Maintain regular, non-grant-dependent feedback channels (e.g., online form promoted via WhatsApp) with assigned staff and set review frequency.



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- Commit to a simple transparency cadence: what was heard, what changed, what didn't, and next steps. Ensure that this is reinforced through repeat engagement.

8) Resource and coordinate for consistency nationwide

- Pair local park/community liaisons (relationship-building, facilitation) with central coordination (standards, tracking, learning) to avoid duplication and missed insights.
- Follow a standard participation sequence: identify/analyze stakeholders → select tools → define topics → decide level of participation → manage and monitor the process.
- Communicate progress continuously. Regularly share updates on how community input is influencing decisions, track implementation of agreed actions, and celebrate milestones. This helps communities see tangible results from their participation.

Bottom line: Effective MPA consultation succeeds when it is continuous, locally grounded, visibly responsive, and structured for shared influence, with trust-building and fairness treated as core technical requirements, not “soft” add-ons.