

## Sharing MPAConnect's knowledge

Port Honduras Marine Reserve, Belize

Local solutions for long-term and equitable MPA financing



PHMR participating in various MPAConnect activities, 2012-2023 (Photos: E. Doyle, P.Etienne, D. Baker)

## The local context

Co-managed by the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) with Belize Fisheries Department, Port Honduras Marine Reserve (PHMR) was a founding member of MPAConnect in 2011 and has been a SPAW Priority Site since 2015. It is one of the 10 largest MPAs in MPAConnect (405 sq km) with wetlands, mangroves, offshore cays and fringing reefs. PHMR plays an important role in national fisheries management, as well as in Toledo state's sustainable development. It also attracts visitors for fly-fishing and receives paying volunteers, gap year students and interns who participate in MPA monitoring and management.

Established in 2000, PHMR has an experienced management team that runs innovative MPA programs, especially related to sustainable financing and stakeholder engagement. TIDE implements best practices in MPA enforcement, monitoring, communications and sustainable livelihoods.

## Networking and sharing with MPAConnect

Between 2012 and 2023 the TIDE/PHMR teams have been engaged in 13 MPAConnect Caribbean regional or Meso-American Reef sub-regional peer-to-peer workshops and benefited from nine small grants and targeted technical support from MPAConnect. These addressed PHMR's priority needs related to financing, enforcement, fisheries management, outreach/education, bio-physical and socio-economic monitoring, and climate change. In the MPA management capacity assessment, PHMR selected the highest tier of management capacity for 12 of 20 management elements. Accordingly, PHMR has served as a valuable mentor to other managers in the MPAConnect network on at least six occasions. TIDE has also hosted multiple MPAConnect activities for peer sharing. See annex 1 for more details.

## Special MPA management expertise



PHMR brings special experience to the network in relation to *MPA sustainable financing and sharing benefits with local communities*. This has been in part shaped by capacity sharing and technical support through MPAConnect during the past 12 years, including support for sustainable financing strategy development, business planning, the establishment of Ridge to Reef Expeditions, and sustainable livelihoods work with stakeholders.

## The challenge

*Like many MPAs, PHMR faced the challenge of never quite having enough funding to do everything that the managers would like to do.*

In recent years PHMR has operated with an annual budget of around US\$550,000 (based on pre-COVID numbers), which is considered to be above the basic budget needed but less than the MPA's optimal operating budget. PHMR does not receive funds from government. While PHMR has been very successful in receiving grant support, donors typically place restrictions on their funding allocations and limit them

to set deliverables. What PHMR most needs is sustainable financing – unrestricted, predictable and resilient financing – especially to support investments in community programs associated with PHMR.

Engaging with stakeholders and sharing MPA benefits with local communities are part of successful MPA management at PHMR. Existing community programs include:

- The Community Researchers program [Community Researchers – TIDE \(tidebelize.org\)](https://tidebelize.org/community-researchers)
- The Community Stewards program [Community Stewards – TIDE \(tidebelize.org\)](https://tidebelize.org/community-stewards)
- The student scholarship program [Scholarship Students – TIDE \(tidebelize.org\)](https://tidebelize.org/scholarship-students)
- Youth clubs (during COVID there were a lot of high school and university students at home within the PHMR buffer communities and TIDE helped to form youth clubs that participate in environmental and social projects)
- Sustainable livelihoods programs.

The importance of unrestricted funding for the development and continuity of these programs, as well as for core MPA management activities, acted as a trigger for the establishment of new, sustainable financing strategies by TIDE.

### MPA management action

TIDE Tours ([Belize | TIDE Tours – Where every adventure supports communities & conservation](https://tidebelize.org/tours)) was established in 1999 as TIDE’s first protected area-related enterprise to generate unrestricted income for protected areas management. Its focus is on offering tourism services such as local tours, accommodation bookings and flight reservations, sourcing what it can locally and taking guests off the beaten path. The Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions Program ([Educational Programs – Belize | TIDE Tours](https://tidebelize.org/educational-programs)) was developed by TIDE in 2014 as a new business model and niche tourism product offering educational expeditions and authentic protected areas management experiences to paying volunteers, especially targeting overseas universities, gap year students, families and individuals.

The core benefit to PHMR from TIDE Tours and Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions is sustainable, unrestricted income. But there are also direct and indirect benefits to communities, and benefits for conservation, which in turn are also paying dividends for MPA management. *Direct benefits* for communities come from employment in PHMR, TIDE and in local businesses offering tourism products, and from revenue generated by tour groups and expedition guests. *Indirect benefits* accrue to service providers, through the purchase of goods and as income brought into the community has a ripple effect.

*Conservation benefits* accrue in multiple ways. As natural resources and intact ecosystems become valuable commodities for responsible tourism, TIDE Tours and Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions help drive increased community support for effective MPA management and coral reef conservation. Efforts to promote sustainable livelihoods options are driving a transition from extractive to non-extractive uses of marine natural resources. The training of fishing guides in fly-fishing was a notable success in promoting healthy intact wildlife populations and enhancing the local tourism product.

TIDE is a prominent organization in the local community and takes its *social responsibility and the sharing of MPA benefits* seriously. Through management initiatives benefiting fishing communities, unrestricted



An initiative of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States funded by the European Union



revenue generated by TIDE can be re-invested in community programs. In turn, stewardship, stakeholder engagement and sustainable livelihoods associated with PHMR are enhanced.

## Take-away messages for MPA managers

*Successful financing strategies align with your MPA mission.* Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions is integrated with MPA management activities, it provides an authentic tourism experience and by participating in real conservation programs such as coral reef or marine mammal monitoring, visitors contribute to MPA management in a hands-on way.

*Don't compete in MPA enterprise development with the stakeholders in your MPA.* Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions has not been perceived as competition by any sector. To the contrary, it employs previously trained community researchers to assist with the visiting students, and other service providers such as tour guides, cooks, cleaners and boat captains, generating employment for locals. Some of the visiting groups stay in local hotels, contributing to businesses in Punta Gorda and its surroundings.

*Constantly communicate the community benefits of MPA financing.* Stakeholders often assume that MPAs are generating revenue that benefits only managers. They don't necessarily see that money is invested in community programs and put into sustainable development.

*Work with and for local communities* and key stakeholders to develop local stewardship for the protected area, and ongoing communication on the benefits of protecting and using resources sustainably. Without community/stakeholder participation and buy-in, it is not possible to effectively manage a protected area. Good results with local communities and stakeholders require ongoing communication, and investment in community development.

*Some MPA business tips.* Consider the *liabilities* associated with your financing mechanism. Carefully evaluate risks and mitigate them by implementing all safety measures possible. Take out insurance coverage - all income you make in a year could go in one day if you are not fully covered.

Although Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions has been very successful and is being replicated by others, it is costly to operate. If an MPA doesn't already have the relevant infrastructure, equipment and staff, then this investment is needed. *Ongoing marketing is critical* to the success of Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions and merits investment. In the PHMR case, TIDE approached marketing via its extensive network of international former interns and volunteers who are willing to give back to TIDE by representing Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions in their own universities, schools and communities. When TIDE invests in marketing such as participating in tourism industry shows then this pays off in increased business in subsequent seasons.

Business is competitive so *be creative* by offering new products or tweaking existing packages. MPAs have a unique opportunity to offer authentic experiences in the conservation field, however, the key is ensuring that there are community benefits.

*Be versatile*, not overly dependent on one tourism sector. COVID has shown that as a financing mechanism, MPA enterprises are vulnerable to disruption. TIDE responded to the challenge of the pandemic by developing tourism packages that appeal to national visitors.

## Lessons for sharing about MPA management capacity

*There is no one-size fits all solution for MPA sustainable financing.* When TIDE participated in the first CaMPAM peer-to-peer workshop on sustainable financing in 2011, the focus was purely on *sharing successful financing strategies* among managers in the MPA network. Whilst the success stories provided inspiration for MPA managers, this approach *inadvertently encouraged direct replication* without regard for aligning financing strategies with an MPA's mission, and without tailoring a sustainable financing plan to each MPA's unique context.

*Site-specific support for financial planning is critical.* Fortunately for PHMR, the first NOAA cooperative agreement grant through GCFI/MPAConnect in 2012 provided TIDE with site-specific support develop an innovative and uniquely tailored sustainable financing strategy for PHMR. This resulted in a business plan and pilot implementation of Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions.

At the World Parks Congress in 2014, MPAConnect's Coordinator participated in a conservation financing session hosted by Wolfs Company and learned about applying the *Eco2Fin Framework for site-specific sustainable finance planning*. When managers from Roatan Marine Park in Honduras sought to replicate TIDE's Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions, MPAConnect and Wolfs Company facilitated sharing about sustainable financing by both MPAs and assisted Roatan Marine Park in applying the Eco2Fin framework to assess the fit of Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions. Based on the evaluation of ease of implementation and projections for return on investment, Roatan Marine Park decided against replicating Ridge-to-Reef Expeditions and instead expanded an existing financing strategy which ultimately proved successful for them.

Good MPA financial management and equitable benefit sharing starts with *taking the time and effort to build an MPA budget*. Having solid financial planning tools allowed TIDE to budget adequately for PHMR core activities and its community programs and to develop financing strategies that best close the gap in MPA financing. Through MPAConnect TIDE received technical support in planning and budgeting and TIDE then developed its own financial planning tool in Excel. Together with Wolfs Company and MPAConnect, TIDE helped shape this into MPAConnect's template budgeting tool and mentored Eastern Caribbean MPAs in using the tool to develop their own MPA budgets. Efforts continue to modify this template and make it as user-friendly as possible.

Making progress on MPA sustainable financing requires a suitable governance structure and legal framework to enable the MPA to generate revenue, and to keep it for re-investment in core MPA activities and community programs. The *MPA co-management system established by the Belize government* has been very positive in terms of effective management of MPAs and enabling their sustainable financing. The members of the MPAConnect network have most recently asked for a review of regional best practices in the legal framework underpinning MPA sustainable financing. This could be a *follow-up action for MPAConnect and UNEP-CEP*.

## Annex 1

### Port Honduras Marine Reserve – MPAConnect

Date	Location	MPAConnect Capacity Building and Networking Activities	P2P	Grant/ Technical Support	Mentor
<b>Sustainable financing</b>					
2011	Puerto Morelos, Mexico	Peer-to-peer Workshop on Sustainable Financing Strategies for Caribbean MPAs	1		
2012	Punta Gorda, Belize	Business Planning for TIDE Tours and MPA Financial Sustainability		1	
2017-2018	Punta Gorda, Belize	Financing exchange project with Roatan Marine Park and expertise from Wolfs Company	1		
2019	Provo, TCI	Peer-to-peer Workshop on MPA Sustainable Financing (network mentor)	1		
2019	St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada	Mentorship for Five Eastern Caribbean MPAs on MPA Financing			1
2022	Punta Gorda, Belize	Review of Sustainable Financing Strategy for TIDE		1	
<b>Law enforcement</b>					
2012	Key West, USA	Peer-to-peer Workshop on Enforcement and Building Compliance for Caribbean MPAs	1		
2014	Punta Gorda, Belize	MPA Law Enforcement Assessment		1	
2015	Roatan, Honduras	MPA Practical Enforcement Training with RMP	1		
2017	Punta Gorda, Belize	Strategic Enforcement Planning Session		1	1
<b>Fisheries management</b>					
2013-2014	Punta Gorda, Belize	Utila Fisher Association Development and Exchange Visit to Punta Gorda, Belize			1
2018	Saba, Dutch Caribbean	Peer-to-peer Workshop on Fisheries Management for Caribbean MPAs	1		

Date	Location	MPAConnect Capacity Building and Networking Activities	P2P	Grant/ Technical Support	Mentor
<b>Outreach/education</b>					
2016	Cancun, Mexico	Peer-to-peer Workshop on Outreach and Education for Caribbean MPAs (network mentor)	1		
2019	St Vincent and the Grenadines	Sharing TIDE's Community Researcher Program with the Grenadines Network of MPAs			1
2018	Belize City	Wrap-up Meeting on MPA Education	1		
2019-2020	Belize City and remote	National MPA Networking Assistance and Communications		1	
<b>Resilience to climate change</b>					
2015	Punta Gorda, Belize	MAR Regional Workshop: MPA Management Challenges Through a Climate Change Lens (co-organizer and host)	1		
2015-2016	Monkey River and Punta Negra, Belize	Local Early Action Planning for Adaptation to Climate Change		1	
2015-2016	PHMR	Coral Bleaching Monitoring Plan		1	
<b>SocMon and sustainable livelihoods</b>					
2012	San Ignacio, Belize	MAR Regional Workshop: Alternative Livelihoods and Sustainable Tourism Workshop (co-organizer and host)	1		
2013-2014	Punta Gorda, Belize	Implementing Capacity Building in the Mesoamerican Reef MPA Community: Small Business Microgrants		1	
2013	Corozal, Belize	MAR Regional Workshop: SocMon Training	1		
2014	San Pedro, Belize	Implementing Capacity Building in the Mesoamerican Reef MPA Community: End of Project Meeting	1		
<b>Bio-physical monitoring/Stony coral tissue loss disease</b>					
2019-2020	PHMR	Response Planning for Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease		1	
2019	Key West	Peer-to-peer Workshop on Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease	1		

Date	Location	MPAConnect Capacity Building and Networking Activities	P2P	Grant/ Technical Support	Mentor
<b>Presentations and participation at wrap-up meeting</b>					
2011	Puerto Morelos, Mexico	Participation in GCFI Annual Meeting			
2014	Barbados	Participation in GCFI Annual Meeting			
2015	Panama	Participation in GCFI Annual Meeting			
2016	Grand Cayman	Participation in GCFI Annual Meeting			
2017	Chile	Participation in IMPAC4 conference and MPA capacity session			1
2023	Remote (Vancouver)	Participation in IMPAC5 conference and MPA financing session			1
Total			13	9	6