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How the post-COVID world will be different for MPAs (and how practitioners can plan ahead for the next disruption)

What will the MPA world be like when this pandemic is over? Back in May 2020, [an essay in PARKS journal](#) suggested the post-COVID future for protected areas could take a few directions. These ranged from bad (a global economic depression and persistent decline in conservation) to hopeful (a newly inspired commitment to the value of biodiversity protection). The essay's authors said the latter was the only sustainable path forward, with increased investment and dramatic conservation actions.

A year later, MPA News revisits that essay to see if we're closer to gauging what the future holds. We spoke with its lead author Marc Hockings of the University of Queensland, and one of his co-authors, Carol Phua of WWF. More recently, Phua led the writing of a separate article on the 'new normal' for MPAs after COVID, published this month in PARKS journal and [available here](#). (That paper is part of a [special issue](#) of the journal on COVID-19 and protected and conserved areas.)

MPA News: In terms of the possible post-COVID scenarios you described a year ago – ranging from a decline in resource protection to a new societal relationship with nature – would you say we have enough evidence now for which one is most likely?

Marc Hockings: I think it is too early to be sure which way we will go, and likely the response will vary from country to country. However, we hope that the aggregate response creates pressure for the development of the new relationship with nature that is the basis of our hopeful scenario. What is clear is that, in the past year, leaders from across the world and from many different sectors have voiced the imperative of a new relationship with nature. To quote just a few examples:

Antonio Guterres, Director General, United Nations

"Making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century, it must be the top, top priority for everyone, everywhere."

Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director, International Monetary Fund

"The best memorial we can build for those who lost their lives in the pandemic is that greener, smarter, fairer world."

World Economic Forum

The WEF's new Future of Nature and Business report states there is "no future for business as usual," and that "a fundamental transformation" is needed across the socioeconomic systems of food, land, and ocean use.

Furthermore the [Leaders' Pledge for Nature](#), signed by political leaders from 64 countries ahead of the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020, committed to putting biodiversity, climate, and the environment at the heart of COVID-19 recovery strategies.

There are some promising signs that this is being translated into action. In its latest budget statement, the Canadian Government committed C\$3.9 billion (US\$3.1 billion) over the next 10 years for nature-based climate solutions, including ecosystem restoration and wildlife protection. This is combined with a commitment to protecting 25% of Canada's land and ocean by 2025, and 30% by 2030. Meanwhile, New Zealand announced a NZ\$1.26-billion (US\$0.9-billion) COVID response budget measure focused on nature conservation.

That being said, national protected area agencies elsewhere point to the fact that budget constraints in coming years will be greater than ever, as governments continue to grapple with their COVID expenditures.

MPA News: Carol, your new essay in PARKS journal anticipates a post-COVID world for MPAs that's different from before the pandemic. What do you see?

Carol Phua: A year ago, most people (including practitioners) were hopeful that things would get back to normal by 2021. Now we're in 2021 and they haven't. What is increasingly clear is that we are not going back to where we were before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. There is a 'new normal'. A world without COVID may not exist for a long time.

To address the impact of COVID on marine protected and conserved areas (MPCAs), the new paper gathered a mixed group of MPCA practitioners and non-MPCA experts. The latter were people from the technology and finance sectors, to help address how advances in those fields could strengthen or otherwise impact MPCAs.

We collected 15 MPCA case studies from across the globe to see how COVID has impacted their current work. We discovered that there were several factors that dictated whether a site was particularly vulnerable or resilient to the pandemic. These included whether the site had sustainable financing, and how its management and communications were structured, among other factors. For each of these, our paper looked at opportunities for learning from the experience of the pandemic and ensuring more effective management in the future. Notably, we found an increasing role for emerging and applied technologies in MPCA management going forward.

It is important to recognize that MPCAs – which often have the dual goals of conservation and sustainable development – are a part of complex systems addressing economic, social, and ecological interactions. The drivers and threats to these systems can also be complex. I propose it would be useful for the MPCA community to start considering concepts from [complexity theory](#) – a field of research that examines the handling of uncertainty in management – to understand the behavior of these systems. This could help management agencies to adapt to a world where pandemics and other extreme shocks are predicted.

MPA News: Along that line, few MPAs foresaw a disruption like COVID-19 occurring, and fewer had a contingency plan in place for something like it. How can MPAs plan for unknowns like this?

Phua: First, there are major *known* disruptions that we are already experiencing. Climate change is the biggest of these and its impacts on coral reefs and ocean systems are already severe. At the MPCA level, there is much that managers can do to improve resilience to climate change – for their ecosystems and surrounding communities. This includes restoring healthy ecosystems to buy time as global emission reductions are put in place. Such initiatives may be the best preparation MPCAs can make to address surprises that nature has in store for us.

In terms of unexpected disruptions, we don't know what the next one will be – it could be another virus. Few MPCA community members foresaw a disruption of the scale of COVID-19. We argue, however, that there is increasing awareness among members of the community that most MPCAs were vulnerable in one form or another – socially, ecologically, financially. There are very few MPCAs that have the stability not only to weather the storm of climate change, but also threats like unsustainable development, changes in political will, or a disruption like this pandemic.

In saying that, there are scenarios that MPCA managers can plan for. And in that planning, we should include experts from outside the MPCA field – like the financial and tech sectors, for example. These outside experts are aware of how COVID has already impacted their own industries. With that knowledge, they can inject relevant insights into MPCA management planning – like how to take advantage of new financial opportunities or tech-based tools to make an MPCA more resilient. This is valuable knowledge.

Taking a more comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach like that can help the MPCA field avoid blind spots that it might otherwise have. The following simple table illustrates the value of envisioning knowledge – and approaching planning – this way.

	Information known to MPCA practitioners	Information known to MPCA practitioners
Information known to experts outside MPCA community	Shared, common knowledge	Blind spots
Information <i>not</i> known to experts outside MPCA community	Knowledge hidden to outsiders (which could lead to incorrect assumptions about MPCAs)	Unknown

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