

## 4.0 Project Methods

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Investigators explored a set of issues regarding stakeholder perceptions of the respective designation processes through open-ended interviews. These were embedded in an analytic process used to assess the relative degree of success of each designation process and analyze the influence of factors that stakeholders perceived as key determinants of success or failure.

### **4.1 Methods used to gather information**

Following a discussion of the core issues, a detailed interview plan was prepared. NOAA provided an initial list of contacts and investigators expanded this with referrals from individuals on the original list and with individual contacts in a variety of organizations. The team attempted to interview the majority of direct participants in each case study, as well as knowledgeable observers who could provide an outside perspective. Investigators continued interviewing new contacts until they had thoroughly cross-checked the important elements of each case and had begun to hear the same material repeated. This required as few as a dozen contacts with the less complex cases and as many as two dozen or more with the more complicated ones.

An introductory statement about the project was used to begin each interview (See Appendix B). A few standard questions were used to establish baseline information and introduce the subject matter, but investigators did not use a questionnaire or survey instrument. Instead, open-ended interviews were used to sound out subjects on the core questions and issues. Interviews were loosely structured around core issues. Giving interviewees the opportunity to set the tone and direction of the conversation, rather than asking them to follow a highly structured survey instrument, permitted more useful information to be gathered. Once the conversation was underway, the interviewer may have branched out from the original direction of the interview to ask additional questions based on the specific issues.

Where useful, one contact was challenged with information obtained from another (anonymously), to probe their depth of understanding, their relative objectivity, or to gather data on a different perspective. Second or third interviews with some contacts helped to follow up on material from an earlier interview or to address questions raised in other interviews. To the extent possible, knowledgeable individuals, with whom we have long-standing prior relationships, were used as fact checkers and to provide greater insight into the history and underlying motivations of particular groups. All interviewees had the option of placing all or part of their interview off the record, and some availed themselves of this option.

Team members made detailed notes of all interviews, shared them among the team members and discussed interview results regularly via email and phone. These discussions aided in refining themes, narrowing hypotheses on which to base findings, and encouraged investigators to challenge each other's interpretations of the validity and significance of particular interviews. Names of interviewees and interview notes were retained by the investigators as confidential work products, and not made available to either the project managers or other information sources (per the terms of the contract with the National MPA Center).

### **4.2 Methods used to address core questions**

Because stakeholder perceptions are important but not the whole story, investigators looked beyond participants' perceptions of how events unfolded in the six case studies. Stakeholder perceptions are important, but not the whole story. To address the core questions, investigators also used the procedural documentation in the MPA Process Review (NOAA 2003), analysis of reported perceptions of participants from different interest groups and management agencies, comparisons of events and perceptions among the six cases, examination of the outcomes, investigation of the literature on process

design, insight derived from consultation within the team and with NOAA project managers. The project findings are thus more than a compendium of stakeholders' observations and judgments. They are instead the result of a synthetic and integrative analysis based on a broad range of information and experience.

#### ***4.3 Methods used to validate findings and avoid bias***

Investigators used a range of techniques to help avoid bias in the data gathering and analysis and to verify conclusions and the basis of recommendations.

To ensure the representative nature of data sources, the team systematically interviewed a broad range of contacts, following suggestions for additional interview candidates, searching for other, independent, reviews of these and related planning processes, and looking for contrasting cases that challenged the plausibility of our emerging conclusions. Where issues emerged that have been treated in literature on planning, regulatory processes, stakeholder engagement or collaborative problem solving, investigators and cited used those resources.

Open-ended questions helped guard against influencing interviewees. Where interviewees' positions were known through their previous activities, investigators used this knowledge as a rough check on the internal consistency of their statements. The team employed other techniques to avoid subtle influences on our own perceptions, such as ensuring the inclusion of "dissidents" with no stake in the status quo or assigning two team members to key interviews where the contact was well known to member us. An internal skeptic's role also rotated among the team members in order to ensure that hypotheses and conclusions were adequately tested as they developed.

Investigators cross checked exceptionally passionate and eloquent interviews with more objective sources and compared verbal claims to the written record where possible. Where they found apparent distortions of the record, the team made further investigation and attempted to corroborate findings and conclusions by comparing several different sources and kinds of evidence, an approach termed "triangulation," to ensure that findings are based on several different, but mutually supportive, lines of evidence.

Information sources were weighted in terms of their relative validity and usefulness, giving more credence to those who had been directly involved in events, who had long-standing experience in the topic being discussed, whose statements could be validated through cross checks with other sources, who provided a thoughtful description and analysis of events, and who responded directly and knowledgeably to challenging questions.