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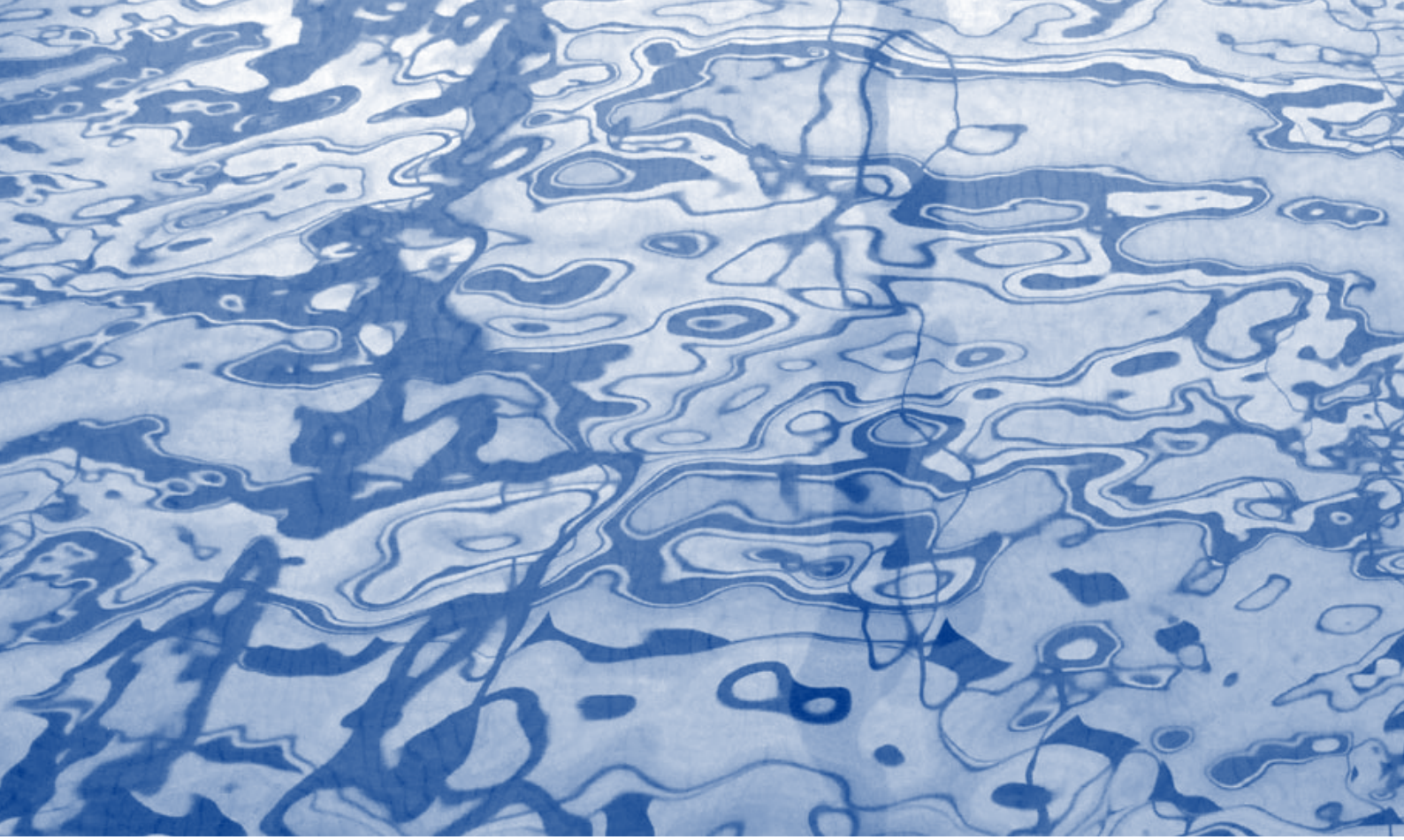

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Abstract

In fisheries management, as in life, perception is equally as important as the truth of a particular matter.

One of the key issues fisheries managers face in allocating between sectors is the perception by one sector that another sector is getting more than its 'fair' share of the resource.

This perception can result from a lack of trust in the process and in the decision-making body itself. Not only that, the perception can be the cause of significant dissatisfaction by stakeholders, and may even result in a reduction of support for, and voluntary compliance with, regulations for the management of the fishery.

While this perception may not necessarily be based on fact, it needs to be acknowledged as a 'real' and primary cause of concern for stakeholders. Perceptions of stakeholders must be addressed equally as well as facts in the allocation process if decisions are to be supported.

Being aware of perceptions and expectations of the various fisheries sectors, and using appropriate and transparent methodologies to involve stakeholders in the allocation decision-making process, helps build sustainable outcomes and enhances the development of effective partnerships.

This presentation will examine some of the methodologies that can be used to involve stakeholders in the allocation process and to maximise the acceptance of the associated decisions.

INTRODUCTION

The world has moved on.

No longer do citizens necessarily view their governments as wise, patriarchal entities that know what is best for their people, and govern their activities with a firm but fair hand.

With increasing populations and educational levels in Western democratic societies, citizens are increasingly questioning government decisions, are demanding to be heard, and to be able to contribute to the decision-making processes. This has resulted in a move towards what is referred to as "participative deliberative democracy"[1] where all citizens - not just vocal special interest groups - have a real say in policy decisions.

With ecological sustainability becoming a key driver in natural resource management, the three dimensions of sustainability – economic growth, social equity and ecological integrity – have to be taken into account.

Public participation can make a significant contribution to decisions guiding sustainable development. Agenda 21, the international 'blueprint' for sustainable development (Deliberative Democracy Consortium 2003), emphasises the critical requirement for public awareness raising, consultation and participation in attaining sustainable development.

Public participation can lead to:

- The discovery of issues of importance to the community;
- Emergence of innovative and creative solutions;
- Increased likelihood of policy and program acceptance and user satisfaction;

1 Deliberative democracy strengthens citizen voices in governance by including people of all races, classes, ages and geographies in deliberations that directly affect public decisions. As a result, citizens can influence the policy and resource decisions that impact on their daily lives and their future (Deliberative Democracy Consortium, 2003)

- Long term (and medium term) financial savings for government agencies; and
- Enhanced risk management.

The evidence is that this results in greater transparency and accountability, greater trust in government, and stronger government-citizen relationships (Gillgren 2005).

The Western Australian Government, in common with other state governments, has recognised the need to work with stakeholders and the community. In fact, current state government policy demands that the views of the community be taken into account in major decisions. Consultation with citizens is required and a separate support unit inside the Department of Premier and Cabinet has been set up to assist government agencies work with the community to develop solutions to issues.

Major fisheries decisions, like the allocation and re-allocation of fish shares for user groups, are required by state government policy to incorporate feedback from the public. We have the opportunity to either make that consultation with the community perfunctory, or make it real and worthwhile so as to establish confidence that we are really listening and acting for the long-term benefit of the community.

Perceptions and allocations – Is it fair? Do we care?

It is perhaps significant that a national fishing survey conducted by the Bureau of Rural Sciences in 2003 discovered that 79 per cent of the randomly selected respondents wanted the management of fisheries to include better consultation with the community (Aslin & Byron 2003).

It is also clear that the level of interest in the WA community about resource sharing in fisheries has increased significantly over time (Baharthah 2004).

The WA Department of Fisheries has been conducting annual telephone surveys of the Western Australian community since 1997. The survey is structured to assess the community's understanding and support of the Department of Fisheries, its strategies and operations, and to examine key aspects of community participation in recreational fishing.

Because 'resource allocation' has been recognised by fisheries managers in Western Australia as a key issue for the community and stakeholders, specific questions about this issue have been included from the inception of the surveys. The change over time in people's perception of this matter has been significant.

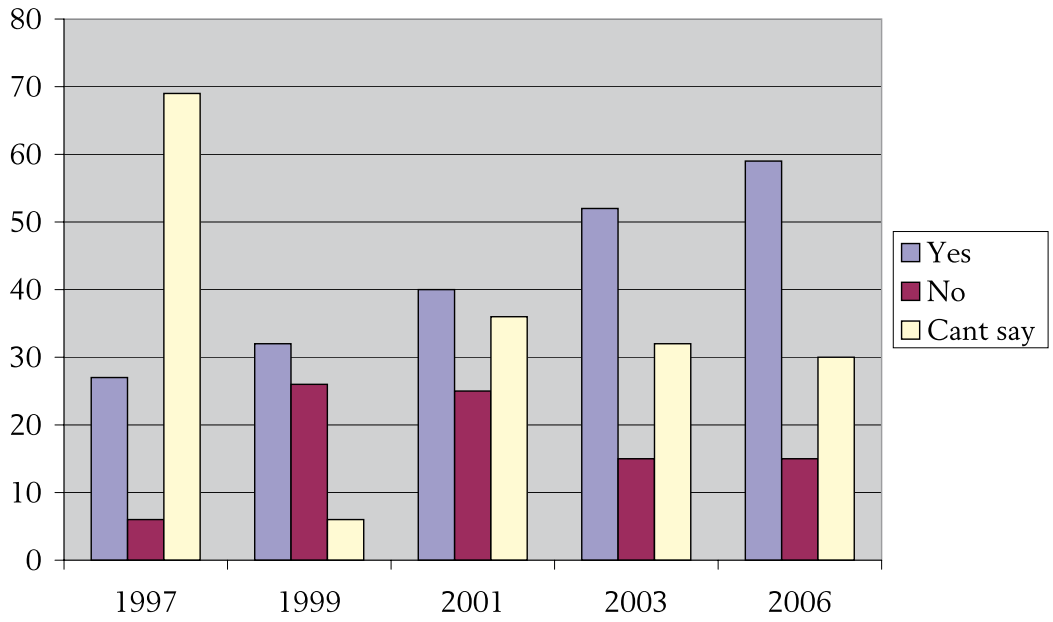
In 1997 about 67 per cent of the Western Australian community, as represented by a random sample, had no opinion of whether or not the Department of Fisheries allocated resources fairly between the so-called 'primary sectors' (in this case specified as being the commercial, recreational, aquaculture and the environmental sectors). Of those who had an opinion about the issue, 27 per cent thought the allocation was fair, and 6 per cent said it was not.

In the results of 1999 survey, there was a significant change in the figures. Suddenly far more people became aware of, and had a strong opinion about, 'sharing the fish.' About 39 per cent considered the allocation of fish

resources to be fair, but 26 per cent considered that it wasn't (Baharthah & Sumner 1999).

Of those who considered it wasn't fair, about 40% of them said it wasn't fair because they thought the department was biased towards commercial fishers. Only 35 per cent of the sample had no opinion on the issue.

While the reasons for the dramatic shift were never formally investigated, it is perhaps of significance that the communications strategies for the department's 'Coastal Fishing Initiative Strategy' (which later 'morphed' into the now better known 'Integrated Fisheries Management' (IFM) strategy) commenced implementation in April 1999 and has continued ever since. The idea that the catch of fish was shared between commercial, recreational and customary fishers has always been central to the communication strategies for IFM.



During 2005/2006, there was a further significant decrease ($p<0.05$) in the proportion of respondents who couldn't say whether the department allocates resources fairly between sectors (29 per cent). There was also a significant increase in the proportion of respondents (to a total of 56 per cent) who considered that the department allocates resources fairly between its sectors, and the remainder (15 per cent) who considered the allocation to be unfair (Baharthah & Sumner 2006).

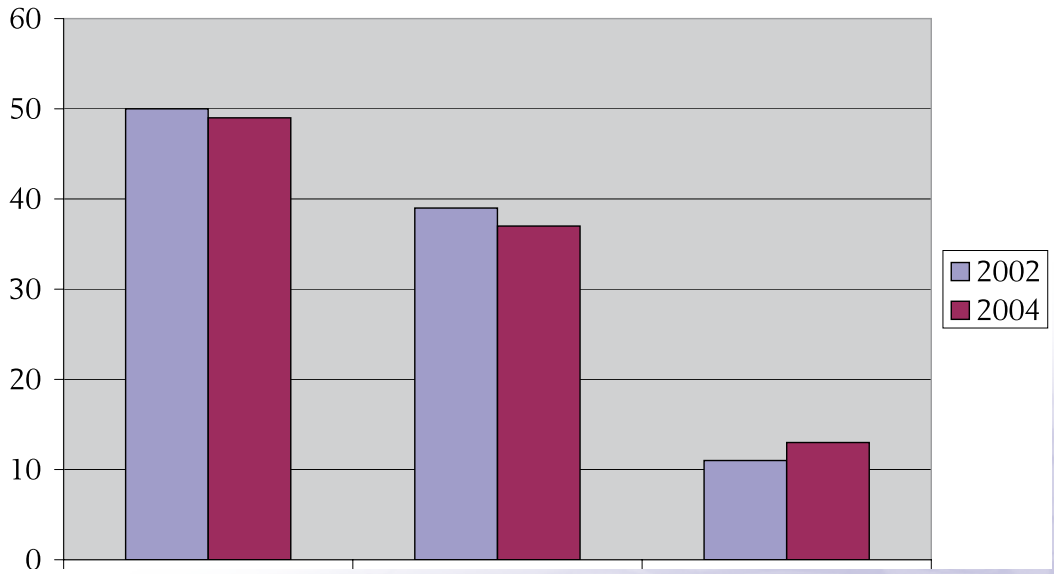
While these survey results may indicate that the department is perhaps on the right track with the fair allocation of fisheries resources as far as the community is concerned, it is still of concern that such a high proportion of people have no opinion, or think the allocation is inequitable.

Stakeholder perceptions of resource allocation

In 2002 and 2004, the department conducted similar surveys of stakeholder groups from the four primary sectors (commercial fisheries; recreational fisheries; aquaculture; and conservation). As may be expected, these groups were more definitive in their opinions.

In the 2002 survey, around 50 per cent of stakeholders considered that the department allocates resources fairly, 39 per cent thought they didn't, and 11 per cent were unable to say whether they were allocated fairly or not.

In the 2004 survey 49 per cent of the respondents considered that the department allocates resources fairly, 37 per cent said they didn't, and 13 per cent couldn't say. Within the sectors, it was found that commercial and aquaculture stakeholders were more likely to say there is a fair allocation of resources, while recreational fishers were somewhat more likely to consider that the allocation was unfair.



So, while it is good to know that a small majority of stakeholders consider the allocation of fisheries shares to be equitable, it is of concern that such a large proportion think it is unfair – or still have no opinion. These indications, combined with the findings of the Department of Fisheries' annual community survey, show that we have a way to go in turning around opinions or creating positive ones on this matter – and, as a consequence, ensuring support for the department's work as it moves into an Integrated Fisheries Management framework.

What happens if you don't involve stakeholders?

The risks of not involving, or not being seen to involve, the community in the decision making process, includes the risk of people being swayed by their emotions and perceptions rather than facts - and consequently forcing the decision makers into less than optimum decisions.

An example– while the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management knew through their good science that their harvesting regimes in the karri forest of the south west were sustainable, and 'bench mark' in environmental standards, the public of WA (most of whom reside in the Perth metropolitan area), faced with emotive images of huge karri trees being cut, creaking in their 'death throws' and crashing to the ground, decided that old growth logging in this and other native forests should be stopped.

The public of WA won - because the strength of their perception was more powerful than the science involved.

The Labor Party came to power on the back of the promise to stop old growth logging – and by 2006, between 86% and 100% of old growth karri and two-tiered karri-tingle forest has been removed from harvesting and placed in reserves- despite the significant impact on numerous jobs and regional towns in the forested areas.

Who should be involved?

Dr Janette Hartz-Karp, in her 2004 essay (Hartz-Karp 2004), poses a number of questions which when answered may explain why many citizen engagement processes fail. She asks, "Why do we only try and consult with people who have special interest? Why would we presume that they would be interested in others' point of view, let alone willing to act in other's interests? Why do we think those without special interest would give their time and energy without any reason for doing so? Why should they bother if experts think they already have the answers and if decision-makers make no commitment to acting on the outcomes of engagement mechanisms?"

Dr Hartz-Karp considers that the people who should be involved in the process are participants who are representative of the population. This view would seem to be supported by the increasing level of community interest in the fisheries allocation debate and the significant proportion of the Australian community who think the community should be involved in fisheries management consultation – as discussed above.

Her views may also be further supported by the periodic complaints/ perception that peak bodies in reality consist of individuals looking after their personal interests rather than representing their sector as a whole.

When involving stakeholders in allocation decisions, the question of whom to involve should hence be broader than 'who will be affected by the decision?' These decisions affect more than the management advisory committees and the commercial, recreational, conservation and indigenous sectors which take part in these fisheries.

Regional communities are impacted socially and economically by the fisheries that surround them – from the people who sell the fishers their boat and bait to the people who sell the fishers their groceries at the local supermarket.

It is after all a question of sustainability – both now and in the future, and all the three dimensions of sustainability – economic growth, social equity and ecological integrity – need to be considered as a whole by government and its departments.

What do we do currently?

Our surveys have shown that people say that the community should be involved by consultation in fisheries management decision-making – but our experience to-date has actually shown a general lack of real participation in the allocation consultation process.

For example, the West Coast Rock Lobster fishery was the first to go through the process of considering allocations for the various fishing sectors. The fishery has about 40,000 recreational licensees, and a further 500+ commercial licensees that participate in the fishery every year.

The relevant management advisory committee (Integrated Fisheries Allocation Advisory Committee) developed a paper as a basis for community consultation (Integrated Fisheries Allocation Advisory Committee 2005), then held a number of public meetings around the state to discuss the issues – clearly expecting that such a major topic which had historically had significant interest and concern would attract large numbers of interested parties.

The attendance numbers were:

- Geraldton – one person
- Jurien – eight people
- Fremantle – one person
- Bunbury – 18 people
- Mandurah – nine people
- Hillarys – 35 people

Now you may think, as some of us did, that these numbers are reflective of poor advertising of either the issue or of the meeting time. To address this hypothesis, a comprehensive communications strategy, using mass media, the departmental website, direct mail, presentations to individual fishing clubs, and displays, was implemented to advertise the next round of workshops.

The attendance figures at the next workshops at Jurien and at Fremantle were 35 people at each – better, but still well below the attendance you might expect to discuss such a major issue.

One of the immediate reactions to these poor figures may be – "well, we gave them a chance to participate and we have met our obligations imposed on us by Government policy – stakeholders cannot complain that they weren't given an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. They obviously don't care."

However, we know from a range of sources (not the least of which is the Department of Fisheries' annual community surveys (Baharthah 2004, 2006)) that people do care (often passionately) about fish resource allocation.

The IFM team is now looking at other reasons for the poor attendance – for example:

- Was it the method of engagement?
- Was it the fact that the majority of people are unwilling to speak out in public about a controversial issue – they would prefer the quiet informality of less direct engagement mechanisms where they can express their views?
- Is it better to use a range of techniques to encourage participation in a number of ways that can suit a broader range of stakeholders?

How could we do it better?

Dr Hartz-Karp and others (for example, Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005; Coleman & Gotze, undated) have noted that effective engagement requires two critical pre-conditions - an environment of mutual trust and respect, and a commitment for the decision- or policy-makers to take account of alternative and emergent solutions or trade-offs.

Engagement should be at an early stage of the process, and expectations clarified so that participants have a sound understanding of the process to be followed, the timeframes, the inputs and outputs, and the elements that can be negotiated and those that are not open for discussion.

Participants should have a say in the consultation mechanisms to be used. Often a range of tools may be appropriate, given time and cost restrictions. The experience must also be enjoyable – perhaps even fun – so that participants may even be enticed to go through a similar process again without feeling they are being 'over-consulted'.

The consultation methods may include:

- Citizens' juries (a group of representative citizens, who take evidence over an extended period, deliberate on it, then make recommendations to Government which takes the final decision).
- Citizens panels or standing research panels (ongoing panels of 1,000-2,000 representative citizens who are surveyed several times a year by post or phone). One problem of this and the previous method is that, over time, citizens bodies of this kind tend to become very knowledgeable – and thus less representative - about the matters they deal with.
- The Charrette method - a collaborative planning process that takes about four consecutive days and involves all disciplines and interested parties in a series of short feedback sessions to produce a feasible plan.
- Formal written consultation (discussion documents that are distributed among the public to industry, seeking comment on management proposals).

- Forums/public meetings (involving citizens and government in discussions)
- Focus groups (an issue is explored in depth for a couple of hours via a structured but open-ended discussion group of eight to ten people representative of a particular sector and lead by a trained facilitator)
- Opinion polls (random or chosen representative samples – 200 to 600 people may meet over two to four days, with polls taken at the beginning and at the end of the events).
- Referenda (asking a question of the whole population).
- Petitions (a citizen adopts a position and invites others to signal their support, may be interactive, end result presented to parliament.
- Active interest in policy citizens – or groups of citizens who register their interest in an area of policy or service. Government or/and representative bodies then proactively inform them of the facts, events, progress and ensure they are engaged in some form of consultation when the time is right; and
- A range of e-engagement mechanisms - eg. e-mail (one-to-one), instant messaging (one-to-one, few-to-few), mailing lists and newsgroups, forms (petitions, structured surveys), chat rooms (slow and chaotic) and bulletin boards). Access to e-techniques has increased - in 1998, 44 per cent of WA households had a home computer, 15 per cent with access to the internet. In March 2003, 67 per cent had home computers, with 53 per cent with access to the internet (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2003b 'The e-government imperative: main findings' March 2003').

Participants need to be drawn from the whole community and their views and values need to be heard and recognised - and a search for common ground should be made.

There needs to be a focus on thoroughly understanding the issues underlying a particular stakeholder consultation and their implications, both in the short and long terms. The information that is provided to help build this understanding must be presented in simple, easily understood and accessible ways.

Ensuring that that engagement between the participants and the decision makers is meaningful for both is an important aspect. Often people will provide opinions based on their values and beliefs, rather than on facts and reality.

An example of this kind situation is where one third of American respondents polled in a survey expressed an opinion about the US Public Affairs Act of 1975 – even though the Act was entirely fictitious (Bishop *et al.* 1980).

This shows clearly that people are willing to comment on matters on which they know nothing. We also know from the various studies done on

community perceptions in Australia that personal belief and value systems - and opinions of friends - are much more powerful than reality in determining an individual's attitude and behaviour.

As a result, facts have to be supplied in whatever format/s (electronic, face-to-face presentations, hard copies, etc) that are likely to be most effective in communicating to both the group and individuals within the participant group.

A draft proposal can then be developed by the group, and could be distributed for further community comment, depending on the time available.

The costs and time required for consultation are often cited as factors preventing meaningful engagement. However, we already spend large amounts of money on expert research that we acknowledge is essential for sound fisheries management.

'Community-based research' or 'social research' that can be obtained from integrated consultative techniques would clearly form a solid basis for decisions affecting sustainable fisheries. It can also be considered a long-term cost saving, as participants have agreed to a process and while they may not agree with the ultimate decision, at least may respect how it was developed. As a result, they are more likely to support the outcomes and comply with the resulting rules.

The Office of Citizens and Civic in WA has discovered that the more active consultations cost about one per cent of the project budget (Gillgren 2005). The managers responsible for the implementation of projects where active and structured community consultation has occurred (for example, the Roe Highway project here in Perth) have estimated that the overall savings directly attributable to achieving active community engagement in the project is five per cent of the total budget.

What can you expect as an outcome?

You may believe that the best we can hope for from stakeholder consultation is satisfaction (albeit grudging) that everyone has been heard and their opinions taken into account – but more can be achieved.

In addition to turning around the perception that government doesn't listen and thus increasing the level of trust the community has in the public sector, stakeholder consultation can:

- Help stakeholders accept the legitimacy of a decision-making process.
- Help the agency carrying out the consultation and the various sectors involved understand each other's concerns.
- Give stakeholders trust and confidence in the sponsoring agency.
- Help ensure key decisions are improved.
- Help stakeholders accept the legitimacy of key decisions.
- Assist implementation through stakeholders communicating what they know about a process/project to others.
- Help in stakeholder support and compliance.

Reviewing, evaluation – Getting better all the time

Fisheries agencies which involve stakeholders actively in decision making processes can't become complacent. Just because one suite of techniques 'worked' for an issue at a point in time doesn't mean that it will enjoy similar success with a similar issue but with a different target audience or at a different point in time.

For example, even if we had developed a successful consultation regime for the allocations in rock lobster at this stage of the process, it would be unlikely that exactly the same regime would be as successful for abalone – or even for rock lobster in several years' time.

Conditions, people, issues and situations are in such a constant state of change that the engagement process has to be constantly developed anew. The game is constantly changing, and engaging citizens is not a spectator sport.

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