

When managing parks, is SANParks learning from stakeholders?

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Photo by Dirk Roux

SANPARKS IS COMMITTED TO MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS, ESPECIALLY DURING THE DEVELOPMENT AND REVISION OF PARK MANAGEMENT PLANS. THE CO-PRODUCED VISION AND HIGH-LEVEL OBJECTIVES OF A PARK ARE THEN TYPICALLY IMPLEMENTED ON BEHALF OF SOCIETY. HOWEVER, FOR PARKS WITH SECTIONS/ECOSYSTEMS THAT ARE OPEN-ACCESS AND CHARACTERISED BY OVERLAPPING GOVERNANCE REGIMES, THERE IS AN INCREASING NEED TO ALSO CO-LEARN AND COLLABORATE WITH STAKEHOLDERS DURING DECISION-MAKING, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION PROCESSES.

Active, meaningful involvement of stakeholders in making decisions around the management of protected areas is now widely considered essential to achieve sustainable conservation outcomes. There are three domains of importance in this regard; first, the normative perspective argues that people have a right to be involved in matters affecting them. Secondly, a substantive argument holds that diverse stakeholder worldviews, perspectives, knowledge and values can enrich understanding and lead to more robust decision-making. Thirdly, important catalyst for stakeholder involvement in environmental decision-making. SANParks followed suit with the adoption of Strategic Adaptive Management (SAM) in the 1990s. Pioneered in Kruger National Park in response to river conservation challenges, it recognised that collaboration with stakeholders across the broader catchment outside the park was essential. Nevertheless, stakeholders frequently differed in their perspectives, values and expectations around the best conservation decision and outcome,

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effective participation improves trust between parties, legitimacy for decisions and reduces intensity of conflicts (i.e. instrumental argument). However, superficial or token stakeholder engagement can erode trust, reduce legitimacy and increase conflict.

The Brundtland Report (Our Common Future), published in 1987, was an

as is typical of complex conservation issues. Based on this reality, a founding rationale for SAM was that differences among stakeholders could be reconciled through (a) lasting partnerships focused on shared understanding of problems, (b) consensus around a vision of the desired state of the social-ecological system, and (c) an

Strategic Adaptive Management (SAM)

A brand of adaptive management (decision approach for uncertain circumstances, systematically linking learning with implementation) tailored by SANParks to respond to local challenges arising from interdependent social and ecological systems that interact in unpredictable ways

Adaptive co-management

Similar to adaptive management and SAM but with greater emphasis on shared decision-making and authority. It essentially combines adaptive management and collaborative management

Adaptive governance

“Flexible and learning-based collaborations and decision-making processes involving both state and non-state actors, often at multiple levels, with the aim to adaptively negotiate and coordinate management of social–ecological systems and ecosystem services across landscapes and seascapes” (Schultz et al. 2015).

objectives hierarchy, descending from the vision to detailed implementable and measurable actions. Outcomes of actions are monitored and, together with new information, system understanding and subsequent management actions are updated (Fig. 1). This philosophy has continued to underpin application of SAM to a variety of national park challenges, including management of fire,

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SANParks make a genuine effort to facilitate fair stakeholder engagement during ‘desired state workshops’. Park-specific missions and high-level objectives are truly co-produced. However, the ultimate management plan is primarily compiled by SANParks. These are most likely not perceived by stakeholders as co-produced products.

elephants and invasive alien species. In addition, the SAM framework guides development, revision and implementation of management plans for all national parks.



Stakeholders and staff at one of seven desired state meetings for the revision of the Garden Route National Park management plan.

To reflect on whether SANParks’ intent of stakeholder engagement is meeting expectations, two recent studies evaluated this in relation to park management plans. These studies used concepts of ‘co-learning’ and ‘co-production’ as benchmarks for engagement, resulting in interesting insights on where and how learning takes place.

Stakeholder engagement and learning seem to be disconnected. In common SAM practice, stakeholders are strongly engaged in the planning phase during visioning and objective setting steps (blue ovals in Fig. 1). However, learning is anticipated to primarily take place through monitoring feedbacks during evaluation (yellow boxes in Fig. 1).

Our studies show that valuable learning actually takes place during all the SAM steps. In fact, interconnectedness of different forms of learning during the various steps is key to progressing towards a shared vision for a park.

What these insights mean for the future of SAM and stakeholder engagement depends on the type of park!

Current strategies of stakeholder engagement may work fine for fenced parks with controlled and gated access, regulated visitor activities, and a clear and uncontested policy mandate. Here SANParks empowers interested stakeholders to contribute their perspectives towards the setting

Co-production

Processes of bringing together stakeholders with diverse backgrounds (e.g. scientists, decision makers and other stakeholders) to jointly produce context-specific products, services and/or knowledge that relate to an issue of shared concern

Co-learning

A process of deliberate and sustained interaction between multiple stakeholders that lead to a change of understanding that goes beyond the individual to become situated within a wider social network

Stakeholder engagement

The process of involving stakeholders in decision making, management actions and knowledge creation related to an issue that affects them

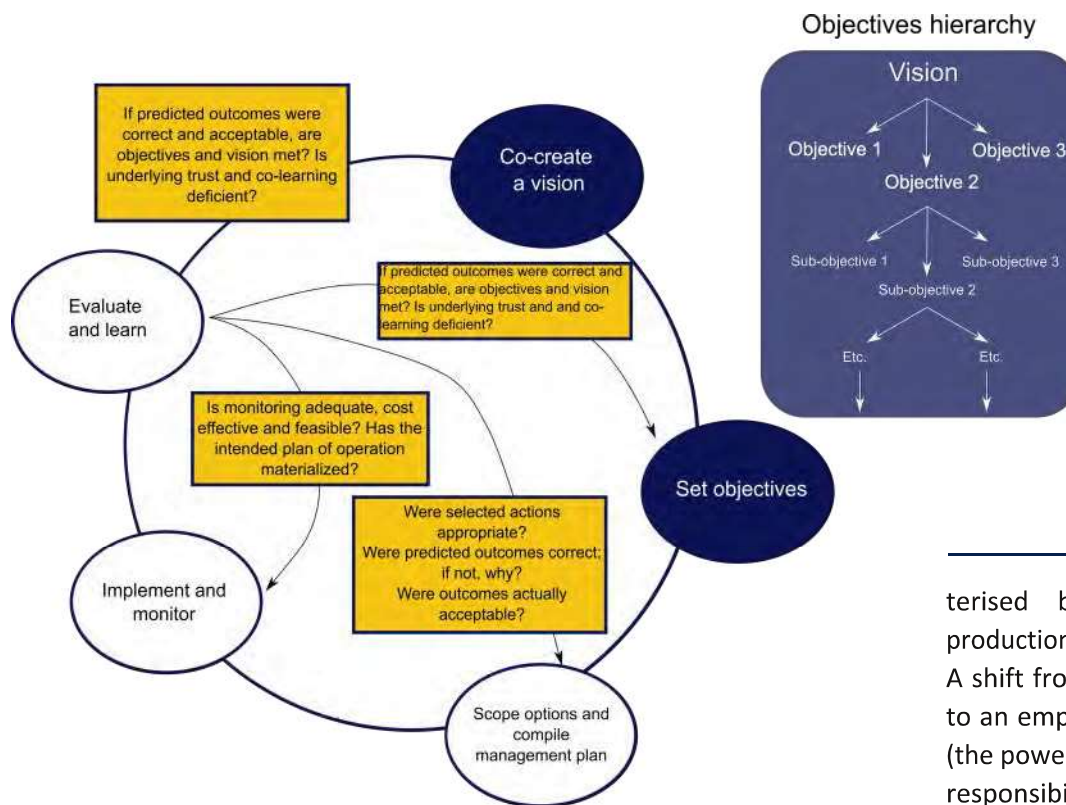


Figure 1. Main steps of Strategic Adaptive Management showing the objectives hierarchy, an outflow from visioning and objectives setting steps in brown ovals, and typical feedbacks from evaluation and learning in yellow boxes (adapted from Roux et al. 2021; 2022).

of a vision and high-level objectives while retaining decision-making power. Feedback is then provided occasionally during implementation and evaluation phases (e.g., via Park Forum meetings). This aligns with the traditional interpretation of SANParks' role to manage national parks on behalf of society.

However, unfenced open-access parks and ecosystems, such as estuaries and rivers, are characterised by overlapping governance regimes. This calls for a more co-productive approach where decisions are jointly developed and owned by the

authority, sometimes multiple authorities, and stakeholders. Parks, such as Garden Route, Golden Gate Highlands, Richtersveld, Table Mountain and the newly established Grasslands, would benefit from stakeholder engagement charac-

terised by co-learning and co-production throughout the SAM cycle. A shift from single-authority control to an emphasis on collective agency (the power to make a difference) and responsibility could be achieved by supplementing SAM with concepts of 'adaptive co-management' and a greater emphasis on 'adaptive governance'. Exploratory work in this regard is currently ongoing in the Garden Route National Park, specifically related to the management of Knysna Estuary.

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- Roux DJ, Novellie P, Smit IPJ, De Kraker J, Mc Culloch-Jones S, Dziba LE, Freitag S & Pienaar DJ. 2022. Appraising strategic adaptive management as a process of organizational learning. *Journal of Environmental Management* 301: 113920. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2021.113920>