Interpreting Remote Resources

We want our audiences to know, understand and support Marine Protected Areas. The big challenge is that a large part of our audience may never directly contact an MPA (unless they're a diver, boater or fisher). In short, we're trying to interpret a resource that is remote from the experience of most people.

The five senses are the key

Everything we know about the world around us has come to us through our five senses. These are the only routes for information to reach our brain. We can use this approach to help our audience construct an underwater world in their mind's eye, and then we can start drawing out the connections between the audience and these important resources.

Start with existing experiences

Your audience may already have some experience with the marine environment that can be used as a foundation. You might try to identify:

- Have they visited an aquarium and seen exhibits or learned about animals that might represent the resource you're interpreting? What can they recall from that experience?
- Have they seen videos, television programs, web sites that provided images or sounds of marine habitats or animals that are relevant to your MPA?
- Can you see any part of nearby MPAs from the shore at your location? Can folks touch the ocean and feel water temperatures and/or taste the water in you location?
- Is anyone in our audience a SCUBA diver, fisher, boater, kayaker that has been in or on the ocean close to your MPA? Can they describe their experience to the rest of the audience?

You can draw these experiences out of audience members and use their descriptions to start painting a picture of the habitat and community present in your target MPA.

Visuals are easy and powerful

Many of us are visual learners and images can be a great source of information. Photographs, videos or other visual media depicting marine life, habitats, substrates, currents, locations or other aspects of the MPA can help us construct comprehensive mental images of this environment. Using varied media, many perspectives (close-ups and large views), isolated and integrated elements of the environment help to make this a richer and more engaging visual experience that creates more detailed impressions. Don't forget to explore how light levels and colors shift significantly in the marine environment.

Sounds can be mysterious and engaging

Since water is more dense than air, sounds travel further and faster underwater. So sound is a significant feature of the marine environment. Sounds, particularly novel sounds, tend to grab our attention and our brain searches for images to help explain the source of novel sounds. Think about whales, seals, sea lions, snapping shrimp, and the host of fish

sounds that can be used to capture our curiosity and help us experience the "soundscape" that exists in many undersea environments.

Touch in a variety of ways

We can use our sense of touch to gain impressions of temperature, texture, shape, density, size and other important qualities. Abalone shells, shale rocks, coarse sand, fine silt, algae, whale baleen, otter fur—there are so many varied tactile sensations you can connect with the marine environment. Remember, your skin covers your entire body, so try touching with your fingers, the back of your hand, your cheek—and you'll get different impressions each time as the sensitivity of each of these areas is different.

Combining smell and taste: chemosensation

Smell is actually the most potent sense most humans have in terms of trigging memories and associations. We can smell some things in the ocean (rotting algae, old fish, salt air, seabird guano, etc.) but it's hard to sniff the water. Taste is a way to detect things in seawater, and salt is the prominent taste for us. However, when we eat fish, invertebrates, algae, there's a vast array of taste sensations available to us.

In humans, our senses of taste and smell play off one another. In most marine animals, these two senses are completely combined into one, highly sensitive chemosensory function.

Multi-sensory outcomes

While we focused on separate senses here, the reality is that humans employ all our senses simultaneously to generate multi-sensory impressions of the world around us. With some sensory input depicting the ocean, even remote parts of the ocean, we can start to generate those same impressions.

To monitory how all this is coming together for your audience, you might ask them to describe the impression of the marine environment that is forming in their mind:

- Imaging you're a rockfish living on a deep reef. Tell me what you see around you….
- If you were an octopus, oozing across the sandy seafloor at night searching for a meal. What do you feel as you explore the seafloor with your sensitive tentacles?
- You're scuba diving in (name your MPA) and you have a chance to hover motionless in the water, just in view of the bottom. What to you see? Can you hear anything? How does it feel?

Bringing in human elements

If your audience is really tuning in to what this remote environment is like, they are probably feeling more connected to it. You may want to introduce some sensory elements related to humans—sounds of boat props, ship sonar; chemical pollutants; siltation; physical damage of anchors or trawl nets, warming temperatures. How would any of these things alter your picture of the marine environment? How can MPAs help mitigate or eliminate these human impacts? Which ones may not be prevented or reduced by MPAs?