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## Certifying Marine Protected Area Professionals in the Western Indian Ocean Region

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There is a global demand—through national and international programs, conventions, and calls-for-action—to significantly increase the number of marine protected areas (MPAs) over the next decade. Currently, however, management effectiveness of many MPAs leaves much to be desired, with MPAs understaffed or staffed with individuals lacking the full range of skills needed for proper planning, design, and management of these areas. In the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) Region, the response until now has been to conduct regional training courses in MPA management and produce training manuals, toolkits, and workbooks. Training courses alone, however, have proven insufficient in building the capacity needed to manage MPAs effectively.

This has led the **Coastal Resources Center at the University of Rhode Island** in partnership with the **Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association** to design and implement a Certification Program for MPA professionals in the region—a program that assesses and certifies MPA professionals based on recognized standards of excellence and a program that responds to regional MPA realities:

- the number of MPAs in the region is growing rapidly
- the management effectiveness of many of these needs strengthening
- the strengthening of MPA site management is linked to strengthening the capacity of those professionals implementing a range of functions within the MPAs

The Program is designed to be adapted and replicated in other regions. It is structured around four “E” components of education, experience, examination and ethics. Most importantly, it sets standards of performance and the levels of knowledge and applied skills and experience against which a “certified” individual is measured. It introduces the use of a practicum to “test” the ability of individuals to apply critical thinking and decision-making to addressing the issues facing those working in MPAs—including such emerging issues as global climate change and linkages to a broader integrated coastal management context. And, it seeks the establishment of ethical rules and good practices that underpin effective MPA management.

The Program’s use of standards implies a performance expectation—i.e., it is not enough to simply complete coursework. Rather, it is necessary to be able to apply the knowledge and

skills at a certain level (standard) of proficiency. The Program has identified six core areas of competency needed by a range of individuals working at different levels within an MPA:

- Policy, Legal and Compliance Frameworks
- Approaches to MPA Establishment and Management Arrangements
- Communication and Stakeholder Engagement
- Financing MPAs
- MPA Management Operations
- Biophysical and Social Environment



**Community monitoring of cockles in Menai Bay Conservation Area**

An ethics component is an essential part of most professional certification programs and since the goal is to move from classifying those working in MPAs as practitioners, to classifying them as MPA professionals, each individual must commit to abiding by a set of professional behaviors. Further, and in order to ensure certified MPA professionals stay current on issues of import, there is a continuing education requirement to renew their certification.

Although not discrete components, there are two other noteworthy aspects to the MPA professionals Certification Program: 1) a knowledge management section focused on MPAs on the WIOMSA website and 2) a program alumni network linked to other MPA networks operating regionally and globally.

As this initiative moves forward, it recognizes the need for broad support in the design, delivery, and financing of such a Certification Program. Several national, regional, and international programs, partners, and donors are contributing programmatically and financially to this certification initiative. Inquiries from others interested in supporting this important regional Programme are welcome.

***"The Western Indian Ocean Certification of Marine Protected Area Professionals (WIO-COMPAS) Programme assesses and certifies Marine Protected Area (MPA) professionals in the WIO region based on recognized standards of excellence. It promotes core competencies, professional growth and ethical conduct."***

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