

A professional and well-organised office creates good first impressions and will save time and ultimately money. It is important to establish some standard procedures for maintaining up-to-date records of all management activities and to create a comfortable efficient working environment. This sheet provides advice on some of the activities involved and suggests ways in which office efficiency can be improved.

The MPA office is the focal point for day-to-day operations. Many, if not all, the administrative duties are carried out there. Ideally the office is situated within the MPA but this is not always possible and it may be in a nearby centre where communications and other facilities are better. Even in this situation, those who staff the office need to be in regular contact with the field staff, at minimum by radio. The office generally has to have some or all of the following facilities:

COMPUTERS AND ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Whilst computers are nowadays more user friendly, with plug and play hardware and easy to use software, setting up local networks (LANs), problem/trouble shooting and maintenance all require particular skills. Ideally, an MPA should have at least one employee with basic information technology (IT) skills training, with back up from a computer specialist in a nearby town, possibly on a retainer contract. With some basic operator and diagnostic training in house, external help can often be effective by telephone or radio. It is important that computers are properly protected from:

- Power cuts, lightning power spikes, damaging high or low voltages: use commercially available power protection equipment such as voltage stabilisers, UPS or power from inverters;
- Viruses, transmitted from portable storage devices or from the internet: install and update commercial anti-virus and firewall software;

- Unauthorised users: use passwords and other blocking methods.

Make sure that staff who use computers have adequate training for the work they are expected to do. Support staff should be appropriately trained in preparing documents, managing e-mail, and maintaining general correspondence.

DOCUMENTATION AREA

The MPA office should include a small library or documentation centre, with the contents catalogued and carefully maintained. This centre should contain all the key references relating to the MPA, as well as more general field guides, reference books and manuals on research and monitoring techniques. Many key references can be obtained free of charge as indicated in this toolkit. A recognised cataloguing system should be used by preference.

RECEPTION AND INFORMATION AREA

The office is often the reception point for visitors, where tickets, brochures and other items are sold, and it may act as an information centre. A welcoming atmosphere is particularly important here, and staff should be aware that a friendly, helpful manner is essential; training for those regularly welcoming visitors may be valuable. The area can be used to display materials about the MPA, and a notice board is often useful to display key information (e.g. meetings, staff leave and absences, staff travel, visitors, events in the MPA such as sightings of rare species). A calendar of key dates and events in the year is also useful.



MEETINGS AND PRESENTATIONS

The office is likely to be where most meetings take place and an area should be made available for this. Meetings will include discussions with visitors and advisors, regular staff meetings, and larger events involving stakeholders. It is easy to waste time on meetings but this can be avoided by preparing for them carefully, conducting them efficiently and ensuring that they are followed up in the right way. Meetings can be one of the best ways of communicating, sharing ideas, reaching decisions and planning future activities.

It is important to clearly define the purpose of the meeting and inform the participants, either verbally or with a written agenda, distributed in advance. Make sure that minutes or at minimum notes are taken during the meeting, and that a summary of the decisions taken and action points agreed on are circulated to all participants as soon after the meeting as possible. Staff meetings should be held regularly, preferably at a predetermined and fixed time in the week or month. Other opportunities, whether formal or informal, should be set up and encouraged to promote communication and information sharing between MPA staff and between the MPA and the stakeholders.

OFFICE PROCEDURES

Consumables (i.e. items that are used in day-to-day management such as fuel and stationery) need regular replacement and the office manager is likely to be responsible for stock control. Overstocking is to be avoided as supplies may have a limited shelf life, especially in hot or humid conditions. Equally, understocking may lead to delays and problems in other work if certain items run out at key moments (e.g. basic stationery). Aim to recycle materials (e.g. paper) whenever possible.

It is also important to ensure that the storage conditions are appropriate – e.g. secure, dry, cool, out of direct sunlight and protected from pests such as insects or rodents. Often separate wet and dry storage areas are required. Older supplies should be issued first – the ‘first in, first out’ principle will reduce losses due to deterioration. If the office is the place where equipment is issued for use in the field, logbooks should be carefully maintained and checked.

Sheet F4 covers purchase and maintenance of equipment in general; broken computers, and photocopiers can seriously hinder the technical and management work of the MPA and hinder it from meeting its objectives. Phone, fax, e-mail, internet access and other communications issues are covered in sheet F7, and maintenance of a good information system is described in sheet G8.

Office procedures should be designed to ensure that the MPA provides a good working atmosphere, where information sharing and networking can flourish. Some simple ways to encourage this include:

- E-mails, memos and other correspondence should be friendly, informative and to the point, and copied to relevant individuals.
- Set up a system to ensure that phone and other messages are given to staff if they are out of the office.
- Provide a refreshments area, where staff and visitors can obtain tea or coffee; keep the area clean and tidy.
- Provide a seating area for general visitors, and desk and working space for consultants and advisors.
- Promote a culture where individuals respect each other; acknowledge good work done, ensure that staff respect each other, and thank people for their contributions to the good management of the MPA.

KEY POINTS FOR THE MPA

- Ensure all equipment is regularly maintained and that it is repaired when necessary.
- Staff should be trained in use of equipment, and may need further training to keep them up-to-date in new techniques or materials, e.g. in the use of new computer programmes.
- Make sure that good office procedures are in place and that staff are familiar with them; provide refreshment areas, where staff and visitors can make tea or coffee and eat food; keep the area clean and tidy and request staff to use this area, rather than their desks and offices at meal times.
- Ensure that everyone is aware of the MPA schedule and calendar of activities.
- Ensure that all office staff are aware of and understand the standard procedures that are required by the head office (if it exists), by donors supporting the MPAs, and others who may have authority over or be supporting the MPA.
- Create a friendly, welcoming environment with good team spirit between staff; hold regular staff meetings and make sure that new staff members have an induction course to learn the MPA management and office procedures.

Sources of further information

Corfield, T. 1993. *The Wilderness Guardian: A Practical Handbook*. African Wildlife Foundation/The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Longman, Kenya. 701 pp.

Humphrey, S. 2003. Module 6. Administration and Management. and Module 7. Financial Management. In: Francis, J. et al. (eds.) *Training for the sustainable management of Marine Protected Areas: a training manual for MPA managers*. CZMC/Univ. Dar es Salaam, WIOMSA, The World Bank.

SEACAM 1999. *From a good idea to a successful project: a manual for development and management of local level projects*. SEACAM, Maputo, Mozambique. 152pp.