The New SMMA

A review by Yves Renard, Executive Director of the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute

In 1996 and 1997, a number of crises brought the Soufriere Marine Management Area (SMMA) in the headlines, and captured the attention of many observers, as some sectors began to request changes to the original agreement, while others complained about the manner in which that agreement was being implemented. On the ground, new conflicts began to emerge, some regulations were not respected, and the role of many key organizations became increasingly unclear.

Beyond the loud voices and the dramatic statements, it was quickly recognized by all concerned that there were fundamental problems which had to be addressed. It soon became clear that these crises – even if they were exacerbated by the economic and political changes taking place at the time – were the symptoms of profound internal problems, and that these problems had to be resolved quickly, in the interest of Soufriere and all those who depend on its coastal and marine resources for their livelihoods. In mid-1997, three years after its formal inauguration, the SMMA was in danger of destruction.

The leadership of the SMMA reacted positively to this difficult situation, and recognized that the crisis had to be turned into opportunities. In July 1997, the Technical Advisory Committee of the SMMA requested that a review of the institutional arrangements governing the SMMA be carried out. Recognizing that the roots of the problems were located in the manner in which the SMMA was structured and organized, the Department of Fisheries and its partners decided to embark on a long journey of questioning, evaluation and re-organization. This process of review was facilitated by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI), and was funded by the French Mission for Technical Cooperation in the Lesser Antilles, through the Fond francais pour l'environnement mondial (FFEM).

The first phase of the review, carried out in late 1997 and early 1998, revealed a number of interesting facts. It noted, for example, that the initial process of consultation that established the SMMA, back in 1992-1994, had failed to develop a clear consensus of the vision, mission and objectives that the Area intended to serve. This, it was felt, was partly responsible for some of the disagreements and conflicts which occurred afterwards. In the absence of a common vision, partners in the agreement were pulling it in different directions, threatening its survival.

Several other problems were found in the structure of the SMMA, in the fact that the agreement was not a binding contract, and in the structure and operations of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), which had become too large and too dispersed to be an effective decision-making body. It was therefore agreed, among other things, that the new SMMA should be guided by a clear mission, that its management structure should be transparent and politically, institutionally and financially autonomous, and that management and enforcement should be locally based.

A very important lesson of the review process is that arrangements such as the SMMA require a formal sharing of responsibility among the various partners. The experience of the first three years of operation of the SMMA revealed that there is always a tendency for the more powerful and organized groups and sectors to assume their authority while the most marginalised groups do not. The new SMMA therefore needed a clear and strong legal basis, in order to guarantee the rights and stipulate the responsibilities of all.

These and other issues were analyzed in detail, in large meetings involving all members of the TAC, and in consultations which were held with all relevant sectors and organizations. As a result, a “new SMMA” is now about to come to life. It will have the following features:

⇒ the Soufriere Marine Management Area remains the portion of coast between Anse l’Ivrogne in the south and Anse Mamin in the north, from the shore to a depth of seventy-five meters;

⇒ this area will be established as a Local Fisheries Management Area under the provisions of the Fisheries Act;
the management of the area will be governed by a new agreement, which has been negotiated among the members of the TAC, and which defines the vision, mission, objectives, regulations, zoning, programmes and institutional arrangements of the SMMA;

current zoning and regulations will be maintained, and a detailed map identifying all zones forms part of the proposed new agreement;

the coordination of management will be the responsibility of a new organization, called the Soufriere Marine Management Association, a not-for-profit company created under the Companies Act. This Association will be comprised of all the agencies which have a demonstrated management function in the Area. Its members will therefore be, initially, five community and non-governmental organizations (the St. Lucia Dive Association, the Hotel and Tourism Association, the Soufriere Fishermen’s Cooperative, the Soufriere Regional Development Foundation and the Soufriere Water Taxi Association), five government agencies (the Ministries of Planning, Fisheries and Tourism, the National Conservation Authority, and the Air and Sea Ports Authority), and one or two individuals nominated by the District Representative and the Cabinet of Ministers. It will be made a Local Fisheries Management Authority under the provisions of the Fisheries Act.

One important provision of the new arrangement will be the establishment of Stakeholder Committee, a broad-based advisory body which will provide a forum for all stakeholders to express their needs, views and concerns. This Committee will meet at least once per quarter, and will be an essential component of the new SMMA, as it will be the place where the views of all parties will be heard.

These recommendations will soon be submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers for its consideration. If approved, they will form the basis for a rapid restructuring of the SMMA, to continue and broaden the excellent work it is now doing at the service of conservation and development in Soufriere.

The mission of the Soufriere Marine Management Area is to contribute to national and local development, particularly in the fisheries and tourism sectors, through the management of the coastal zone of Soufriere, based on the principles of sustainable use, cooperation among resource users, institutional collaboration, active and enlightened local participation, and equitable sharing of benefits and responsibilities among stakeholders.