

Advocates of monument expansion a case study of cognitive dissonance

By Caleb McMahan

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Since attending the recent public meeting on the proposed expansion of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, I've been feeling a sense of déjà vu.

Listening to the testimonies of monument-expansion proponents has recalled my college days and, in particular, a memorable lesson from Psychology 101.

Cognitive dissonance theory traces its origin back to the late 1950s when psychologist Leon Festinger first described the behavior of a doomsday cult that believed the end of the world was imminent and that a spaceship would be coming to pick them up.

What experts found was that when people are faced with information that conflicts with a firmly held belief (i.e., the space ship doesn't come), they will experience discomfort (aka dissonance) and exhibit predictable behaviors in order to reduce it without having to completely abandon the core belief.

A core belief that proponents of monument expansion seem to hold is that we need to protect our oceans for future generations, and that making the proposed monument boundary off-limits to commercial fishing is necessary to achieve this.

But since the proposal was made, opponents have pointed to a lack of peer-reviewed scientific data showing such a conservation benefit exists, and further, that the Hawaii longline fishery does not constitute a threat to the area's biodiversity or cultural artifacts.

So there it is. Information that is in conflict with that core belief. What was so alarming about the Aug. 1 meeting is that monument-expansion proponents seem to react precisely how cognitive dissonance theory predicts: to ignore or deny the conflicting information altogether.

For example, it was pointed out by a pelagic fisheries biologist that tuna do not spawn in the proposed area. Ten minutes later, a monument proponent cited among a list of expansion reasons the need to give fish a place for reproducing away from the threat of longline fishing operations.

Another opponent cited evidence that longline fishing in no way impacts the unique black coral species found on the ocean floor since fishing gear does not reach the bottom — yet was followed by a proponent who testified that protecting that coral species and other benthic wildlife was indeed grounds for monument expansion.

Another behavioral response to cognitive dissonance is that people will modify their core belief in order to accommodate, but still not accept the new information.

This, too, was rampant among pro-monument testimonies. In face of evidence that the longline fleet does not constitute a threat to the endangered monk seal, some proponents changed their tune, saying this is not about the monk seal or banning fishing, but about setting an example for the rest of the world in protecting our oceans in general. Or that protecting against climate change is the justification.

When contrary scientific evidence for the climate change argument was presented, the core belief for expansion supporters shifted again into the need to prevent the inherent greed of industry from imperiling the area's natural beauty.

Throughout the session, high school students at microphones were applauded for giving cognitive dissonance-laced testimony irrelevant to the science-based information.

It's easy to take a stand on an issue. It's much more challenging to develop informed positions and engage stakeholders from across user groups to come up with collaborative solutions. We should be introducing our students to the complexities of resource management instead of suggesting that activism is a form of scientific inquiry.

The Aug. 1 public meeting was a disaster. It demonstrated not only that Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance is on the mark, but also the consequences it can have in dividing communities and undermining the science-based management structures essential to successfully balance the interests of conservation and sustainable use of public resource.

Caleb McMahan is a former commercial fisherman, NOAA fisheries observer and documentary filmmaker; he serves as director of media and marketing at Hawaiian Fresh Seafood.