USER MANUAL

PERCEPTION ELICITATION AND AWARENESS RAISING (PEAR) TOOLKIT

TOOL AIMS AND DESCRIPTION

Successful management of a Marine Protected Area (MPA) depends on local stakeholders being aware of the MPA, perceiving it positively, and complying with its regulations. Understanding how stakeholders perceive an MPA helps managers build collaboration, share benefits more equitably, and sustain the local support on which long-term conservation depends (Bennett, 2016). When awareness and perceptions are poorly understood, gaining that insight becomes essential to safeguard compliance with regulations and to secure local acceptance of the MPA.

The Perception Elicitation and Awareness Raising (PEAR) toolkit was developed within the BLUE4ALL project to help managers do exactly this: to identify how stakeholders perceive and understand an MPA, and to raise awareness of the MPA at the same time. Perceptions are defined here as "the way an individual observes, understands, interprets, and evaluates a referent object, action, experience, individual, policy, or outcome" (Bennett, 2016). The toolkit elicits perceptions across the four dimensions set out by Bennett (2016):

- **Social impacts** — the scale and fairness of the MPA's effects on people's livelihoods, activities and traditions.
- **Ecological outcomes** — perceived environmental change and the community benefits linked to it.
- **Governance legitimacy** — whether the decision-making processes on the MPA are seen as fair, transparent and trustworthy.
- **Management acceptability** — the social acceptability of specific conservation measures and regulations.

Together these reveal not only how much support an MPA has, but also the underlying social, ecological, governance and management factors that shape that support.

TOOL AIMS AND DESCRIPTION

Central to the PEAR toolkit is the principle that awareness raising should be reciprocal. The toolkit does not simply inform stakeholders about the benefits of the MPA; it also gives managers insight into local perspectives, which in turn supports better dialogue and communication (Walton et al., 2013). Accordingly, the toolkit pursues four aims:

1. Assess awareness levels among target groups regarding the MPA's existence and benefits;
2. Elicit stakeholder perceptions across Bennett's (2016) four dimensions;
3. Raise awareness of the MPA among societal stakeholders;
4. Evaluate how well the methods themselves performed in the local context.

In doing so, the PEAR toolkit generates knowledge that supports effective and equitable management, while serving as a first step towards mutual awareness building between MPA managers and other stakeholders.

The toolkit combines four complementary methods. Each has distinct strengths and limitations, which is why they are most effective when used together:

- **Surveys** — accessible, informal and time-efficient. They enable broad participation and interactive awareness raising, though they offer less depth than interviews.
- **Semi-structured interviews** — more formal and time-consuming, and requiring extensive preparation, but they yield deeper insights and help build lasting relationships.
- **Poster and flyer dissemination** — these encourage survey participation, raise awareness, and act as conversation starters during surveys and interviews.
- Joint evaluation — an internal reflection by managers and/or an external activity (such as a workshop or public event) that shares results with stakeholders and co-creates first steps for acting on them.

The methods reinforce one another: surveys reach many people quickly while interviews add depth; posters improve participation and open dialogue; and the joint evaluation turns findings into action. Every method should be adapted to the local context, the research questions and the target groups.

IS THE PEAR TOOLKIT RIGHT FOR YOUR CONTEXT?

PEAR is a targeted, qualitative toolkit. It is helpful for the right question and the right conditions, but it is not a fit for every situation. Use the checklist below to confirm the toolkit suits your needs.

USE PEAR TOOLKIT WHEN...

+ You want to elicit the perceptions and awareness of a defined target group engaged with the marine environment.
+ You have sufficient resources: adequate funding, local assistance (e.g. language support), and a dedicated fieldwork period of at least two to three weeks.
+ Your team has the capacity to interpret social-science / qualitative data.
+ You have both a mandate and the resources to translate findings into actionable change.

DO NOT USE PEAR TOOLKIT WHEN...

- Your main goal is awareness raising alone. That requires a long-term campaign; PEAR is a first step, not a substitute.
- You need to track how perceptions change over time, unless you can implement the tool over a long period.
- You lack the financial, personnel or analytical resources to implement and analyse the tools properly.
- You require a quantitative assessment of awareness and perceptions.

APPLICATION EXAMPLE

HOW WAS PEAR USED IN BLUE4ALL?

Within BLUE4ALL, the PEAR toolkit was implemented in four Living Labs (LLs), where the methods were adapted to the specific context (Adjei et al., 2026). These examples show the range of ways the toolkit can be applied.

- **Littoral Seino-Marin (France) —** a Natura 2000 site where residents and elected officials were largely unaware of the MPA. The team ran an online resident survey, semi-structured interviews with four elected officials, and distributed 38 posters and over 1,200 flyers.
- **Otranto-Leuca (Italy) —** an MPA at an early designation stage. The team focused on understanding the tourism sector's perceptions of the planned MPA, conducting eight interviews with boat and dive operators and an online survey of 50 tourists over three weeks in peak season, followed by a results-sharing workshop.
- **Capo Gallo–Isola delle Femmine (Italy) —** The tourism sector's awareness and perceptions of the MPA were explored using surveys, interviews, a focus group, and participant observation with divers and operators.
- **Katič Nature Park (Montenegro) —** A key challenge in this MPA was low compliance with jet-ski speed limits. Therefore, the team surveyed 98 tourists and six jet-ski providers, interviewed hotel managers and tourist agencies, disseminated posters, and shared results at a public "Travelling Exhibition" on the Day of the Coast.

A consistent finding across all four LLs was low awareness of the MPA, its ecological value and its rules among residents and tourism stakeholders, with many concerns tied to poor communication and low trust in enforcement. This confirmed the need for the toolkit and its value in opening dialogue between managers and local stakeholders.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

How to use the PEAR Toolkit?

PHASE 1 – PREPARATION

Thorough preparation is key to successful tool implementation. Work through the following before any fieldwork begins.

STEP 1.

Define the knowledge gap and research aim.

Specify what you actually need to know; for example, awareness of MPA effectiveness, perceptions of tourism impacts, or attitudes to a specific regulation. A clear focus underlies relevant survey and interview questions. Ensure the whole team agrees on the aim before proceeding.

STEP 2.

Identify target groups.

Determine whose perceptions are important for equitable and successful management and are currently unknown. Depending on context this may include fishers, tourism operators, residents and officials, or several of these. Note which social channels (e.g. associations) you can use to reach each group, drawing on existing relationships.

STEP 3.

Set the geographical scope.

Decide which areas to include, considering resources and logistics. You might prioritise locations where a problem is most serious (e.g. weak compliance with a regulation) or where most people engage with the area.

STEP 4.

Assess resource requirements.

Allocate at least two to three weeks for fieldwork and, preferably, at least two employees. Estimate the costs and confirm the work is financially realistic. Decide how many surveys and interviews are feasible in the timeframe. Where researchers come from outside the local context, plan for local language or cultural assistants, and arrange their contracts in advance. Finally, confirm who in the team will carry out the qualitative analysis.

PHASE 1 – PREPARATION

STEP 5.
Prepare information materials.

Assemble information materials like posters, zonation maps, species guides and management plans to support awareness raising during surveys and interviews. Prepare posters carrying a QR code that links to the online survey. In several LLs, a short information box within the survey (explaining the MPA, its functioning and its rules) was helpful for awareness-raising.

STEP 6.
Develop consent procedures.

Prepare a research consent form and make sure participants understand their rights, the study's purpose, and how their data will be used and anonymised. A template is provided in Appendix 1.

STEP 7.
Prepare the interviews.

Develop questions with the project team. Keep them open and manageable in number (around 10) and use a semi-structured format that allows discussion. Prepare an interview guide with the questions plus suggested opening and closing prompts (see Appendix 2). Pilot-test the questions to check clarity and duration. Aim for roughly 30 to 60 minutes and do not exceed an hour, to respect interviewees' time; in peak tourist season, a 30-minute maximum is more realistic.

STEP 8.
Prepare the surveys.

Decide on format: paper, online (e.g. Google Forms) or both. Offering both is recommended: an online version can be used for QR-code posters, while some respondents prefer paper in person (see Appendix 3). Develop questions with the team and local collaborators. Limit the survey to a maximum of around 20 open and/or closed questions to avoid tiring the participants. Write simple, clear questions and anticipate likely answers and follow-up questions. Pilot-test with a stakeholder or team member to check clarity and duration, and adjust.

PHASE 2 – POSTER AND FLYER DISSEMINATION

- Identify suitable offline channels (tourist offices, hotels, restaurants, transport hubs, town halls, dive centres, boat-rental stands) and online channels (social media, email lists, municipal websites, newsletters).
- Avoid busy or inconvenient periods, such as major holidays, when launching surveys.
- Collect the contact details of key stakeholders for direct online invitations.
- Consider a prize draw to incentivise participation; this improved response rates in the Katič LL.
- Produce bilingual (or multilingual) posters and flyers with a QR code to the online survey, an attractive design, and (if used) a note about the prize draw.
- Place them in relevant public and online spaces, and record which municipalities or businesses want to stay in touch for future participation.

Practical tip:
Begin dissemination early: it raises awareness and incentivises survey responses. Posters also remain visible after fieldwork ends and work well as conversation starters.

PHASE 3 – CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

Surveys and interviews are often run in parallel. Interviews suit stakeholders with detailed, developed views (e.g. operators, officials), while surveys can reach many participants quickly.

Interviews

- Identify and invite interviewees, in person, by email or via social media.
- Ask how much time the participant has, remind them of anonymity, and obtain consent to record (a mobile phone is sufficient). If recording is declined, take manual notes.
- Follow the guide while allowing flexibility for participants to raise their own topics.
- Keep track of time and stay within the agreed limit.
- Clarify next steps and how participants will be kept informed, and thank them for their time.
- Ask whether they can suggest or introduce other useful interviewees.

Surveys

- Find appropriate locations to approach people. Approaching people in low-pressure settings, e.g. in the shade on walking paths, works best.
- Obtain consent before starting.
- Let participants complete the survey independently, but remain available to clarify questions.
- Offer the survey in several languages to improve reach; this increased participation across LLs.
- At the end, ask the participants whether they have any questions and thank them.

PHASE 4 – DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Interviews

- Translate and transcribe recordings.
- Conduct a thematic analysis of the interview data. This is a flexible approach for identifying patterns in qualitative material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In BLUE4ALL LLs, transcripts were coded both deductively (against Bennett's four dimensions) and inductively (letting new themes emerge).
- Triangulate findings across data sources (surveys, interviews and any field notes).
- The process is described more extensively in the tool manual for semi-structured interviews, which you can find in the MPA Solutions Hub.

Surveys

- For online surveys (e.g. Google Forms), export responses directly to a spreadsheet.
- Transcribe and translate open responses if necessary, using transcription software of your choice.
- Analyse closed questions with simple charts to visualise patterns and analyse open questions thematically.

PHASE 5 – JOINT EVALUATION AND RESULTS SHARING

Prepare a concise report summarising your approach and key findings for dissemination to relevant stakeholders. The joint evaluation communicates findings and opens space to discuss their implications, both internally within the team and externally with stakeholders.

- **Internal reflection:** the team reviews lessons learned, assesses whether the research objectives were met and how well the tools worked, and considers the implications for management.
- **External engagement:** organise a workshop, public presentation or exhibition to share results and co-create first steps for applying the findings with societal stakeholders.
- **Sustain the engagement:** this phase can mark the beginning of more frequent engagement. Follow up with participants who expressed interest to co-develop joint actions.

SUMMARY

Advantages and limitations

ADVANTAGES

- Provides in-depth understanding of awareness and perceptions.
- Generates information directly relevant to more equitable and acceptable MPA management.
- Builds new relationships between local stakeholders and managers.
- Raises awareness among local stakeholders during implementation itself.
- Provides tangible qualitative evidence to develop management recommendations.

LIMITATIONS

- Findings are context-dependent and cannot simply be extrapolated, even to other MPAs in the same network.
- Resource-intensive in personnel and social-science knowledge; at least two to three weeks of intensive work.
- Best run in summer to reach tourists, but tourist operators are busiest then and harder to reach.
- Cannot, on its own, substantially change awareness or perceptions unless conducted at large scale over time.
- Harder to apply where relationships with stakeholders are not already established.

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