

Negotiating Difference: Stakeholder Challenges in MPA Co-Management

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the complexities involved in the co-management of marine protected areas involving local NGOs. Based on field research in Belize, it examines the interactions between local NGOs involved in the MPA co-management process with state agencies, and local users, focusing on fishers and tour guides. These interactions highlight the fact that the interests of local NGOs and the resource users they represent are not always convergent. Yet the challenges of negotiating the shifting and, at times, divergent interests are ones for which NGOs are often not prepared to meet. This paper argues that, in tandem with training in strategic planning and proposal writing, negotiation and conflict mediation skills are crucial to the success of building positive relations between local NGOs and community stakeholders and, in turn, to fostering long-term success in the co-management process.

KEY WORDS: Belize, Co-management, Marine Protected Areas

Negociando Diferencias: Retos en el Co-manejo de Áreas Protegidas Marinas

Este documento considera a las complejidades involucradas en el co-manejo de áreas protejas marinas involucrando a ONG's locales. Basado en investigaciones de campo realizadas en Belice, este estudio examina las interacciones entre ONG's locales involucradas con agencias estatales y usuarios locales en el proceso de co-manejo de Áreas Protegidas Marinas, con un enfoque en pescadores y guías turísticas. Estas interacciones demuestra que las intereses de las ONG's locales y los usuarios de los recursos no siempre son convergentes. Sin embargo, los retos de negociar intereses inconstantes y a veces divergentes son tal que los ONG's no están preparados de cumplir. Este documento argumenta que capacitación en planificación estratégico y escribiendo propuestas en conjunto con capacidades en negociación y mediación de conflictos son cruciales para la formación de relaciones positivas entre ONG's locales y usuarios de los recursos de las comunidades y a la vez, para cultivar los éxitos a largo plazo del proceso de co-manejo.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Belice, áreas protejas marinas, co-manejo

INTRODUCTION

It is widely agreed that co-management is as much, if not more, about managing the relationships between stakeholders as it is about managing the resources themselves (Pinkerton 1989, Berkes et. al. 1991, Buckles and Rusnak 1999, Berkes et. al. 2001). In this paper, I examine one dimension of the complex process of managing stakeholder relations in the co-management of MPAs.

Co-management of MPAs involves multiple stakeholders in the implementation of various conservation strategies as the means to the protection of particular marine species or ecosystems. There are typically three key stakeholders: local users, state agencies, and transnational conservation NGOs (CNGOs). While all three share the desire to protect marine resources, it is not unusual for them to have divergent ideas about how this is best achieved. This can, and often does, lead to conflict between stakeholders, a situation that compromises the cooperative effort and, in turn, the effective management of the resource(s) (Goetze 1998, Buckles and Rusnak 1999). The conflict in most cases, is between local users; for example between fishermen and tour guides.

The co-management of Gladden Spit Marine Reserve (GSMR) in southern Belize exemplifies such a scenario of stakeholder conflict, but at a different level. While there are many intriguing dimensions to stakeholder relations in this case, one of the most challenging stakeholder relationships to manage is that between donors and local users. Here I focus specifically on conflicting understandings between local fishers and researchers working for CNGOs concerning 'the problem' of overfishing of spawning aggregations (SPAGs) in GSMR. This conflict underscores the fact that (1) conflicts can take place at levels that transcend local issues, and (2) that negotiating such differences in local and global level stakeholders' perspectives concerning the cause of 'resource problems' and the attendant solution represents a key challenge in the successful co-management of MPAs.

The Co-Management of Gladden Spit Marine Reserve

GSMR was declared an MPA in 2000, based largely on CNGOs' concerns over the threats to grouper and snapper SPAGs in the area, which are noted as being among the healthiest in the Caribbean region. Historically, local fishers have harvested the SPAGs as a means to surviving economically during the months in which Belize's lobster season is closed (February to June). The most popular SPAG to fish features snapper, which spawn during the full moons from April to June. While fishers have also harvested grouper SPAGs (November to January), it is viewed as a less commercially viable species. Moreover, one can still fish for lobster during those months, a far more lucrative activity: during the 2000 - 2001 season, lobster fetched \$15.00/lb at the local Co-operative, while scale fish garnered a mere \$2.50/lb (Placencia Fishermen's Co-operative 2001:5). As a result of this and an increase in local tourism from November to April, area SPAGs have received increasingly less attention from local fishermen over the past decade. Indeed, production numbers from the local Co-op show a steady decline in scale fish production

since the mid-nineties (Palacio 2001:30). More recently, Gladden's SPAGs, which predictably attract whale sharks, have become a popular tourist attraction. Locally-based and foreign tour operators offer trips to snorkel and dive among the whale sharks during the spawning season.

Similar to the co-management of MPAs elsewhere, the stakeholders involved in the co-management of GSMR include local users (fishermen and tour guides), state agencies (Department of Fisheries) and CNGOs (World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, etc). Legally, the co-management partners for GSMR are Friends of Nature (FON), a community-based NGO which represents local users (largely fishermen and tour guides) in five area villages, and the Fisheries Department. As stipulated in the co-management agreement, FON has legal responsibility for developing a management plan for GSMR and implementing the daily management activities contained therein. Co-management of GSMR would not be realized, however, without the funding from CNGO donors such as the Oak Foundation, Conservation International, the Global Environment Facility and, more recently, The Nature Conservancy.

Overfishing? Conflicting Local-Global Perspectives

During thirteen months of fieldwork in Placencia Village, where FON is based, I conducted over fifty semi-structured recorded interviews and dozens of informal interviews with local, national and international stakeholders. Interview questions focused on stakeholders' understandings of MPAs, co-management and what the key resource management and/or conservation issues were in the MPAs that FON co-manages. During both the formal and informal interviews the issue of overfishing of the SPAGs was raised as a key problem in GSMR, and a concern for local fishermen and CNGOs alike. That being said, each group holds divergent views of the cause of the problem of overfishing in the area. CNGO representatives focused heavily on the use of the SPAGs by local fishermen, and consistently pointed to the need to promote alternative livelihoods for fishers to reduce the stress to the resource caused by their seasonal harvest. The implication suggested that the solution to the problem of overfishing was for local fishermen were to shift their efforts to non-extractive tour guiding activities.

Fishermen, on the other hand, were aware of these claims, and were at a loss to see how their fishing with a two-hook handline system could alone significantly affect the SPAGs. Rather, they argued, it was fishers from other areas of Belize, together with those from Guatemala and Honduras (who did not have licenses), who were causing the depletion of fish from the SPAGs. Indeed, they had observed the used of illegal gear such as nets, and suggested that foreign fishers used technology such as fish attracting devices and GPS that, together with fishing at night, amounted to their 'stealing' far more fish than local fishers could ever harvest themselves. Since foreign fishers take their catch out of the country, they said, there is no way to know just how much is being 'lost' to their harvest of the SPAGs. The solution as they see it, it to increase patrols of the GSMR area during the spawning season, and to both increase the punishment for poaching and implement it when transgressors are caught, something they complain is not happening at the present time.

Co-Management Challenges

The point of exposing the divergent views on the problem of overfishing in GSMR's SPAGs here is not to evaluate which actor's claim or knowledge is more accurate, and therefore 'more legitimate'. This paper does not seek to establish who is 'right' concerning the issue, but to highlight how such differences relate to the process of successfully co-managing MPAs.

The first point, then is that stakeholders' understandings of the problem of overfishing relates to their *interests* concerning the resources of GSMR and how they value the SPAGs. CNGOs wish to protect the SPAGs as a critically important biological phenomenon that relates to the survival of the species by restricting fishing of these key breeding grounds. Though not to the exclusion of local livelihoods, the focus is on biodiversity as key to the survival of the planet. Hence the promotion of alternative livelihood training for local fishermen harvesting the SPAGs in GSMR. Fishermen wish to protect the SPAGs by eliminating foreign fishers as their value of the resource relates to their means of livelihood; their ultimate concern is for the protection of the SPAGs as a resource that facilitates the survival of their families. As a result, they emphasize the need to increase enforcement of existing management regulations. Thus, there is an intersection of global and local interests regarding the use and management of SPAGs in GSMR.

Second, the differences in understanding between fishers and donor researchers reflect a fracture between local and global perceptions of a key management issue. This is a serious challenge to the successful co-management of GSMR. Stakeholders who view the problem differently will also differ in what they think the most appropriate solution(s) would be. Tension, and often conflict, emerges as a result. In this case, fishermen suspect that CNGOs simply want to 'get them out of the way' and are threatening their survival. Such a lack of trust impedes the cooperative spirit that allows for the negotiation of differences required for co-management to succeed (Pinkerton 1989, Goetze 1998). Ultimately, this tension in the relationship between the local fishers that use the resources of GSMR and CNGOs that fund the co-management of the MPA, affects not only the level of cooperation between stakeholders but also the ability of FON to implement management strategies with which local users will willingly comply.

It was during the process of community consultation regarding the draft management plan for GSMR that FON faced the challenge of negotiating the differences between donor and fishers' perceptions concerning the means to protecting the resources of GSMR. As the organization charged with developing and implementing GSMR management activities, FON has become caught between meeting the demands of its CNGO donors to promote alternative livelihoods for local fishers and, at the same time, representing the interests of those fishers who cry foul over being, as they see it, unfairly targeted as the cause of overfishing. This is a difficult scenario for FON to negotiate as an organization that grew out of community concern for the protection of local marine resources, yet also was greatly assisted in its development by CNGO staff and project funding. Moreover, it has caused delays in finalizing the management plan and implementing measures for the protection of SPAGs in

GSMR. While it has had success in managing conflict between local stakeholders, negotiating differences in local-global perceptions of resource issues in GSMR is a role for which FON was not prepared. It is a unique challenge, and mechanisms for addressing such a scenario, while not the scope of this paper, would usefully be addressed in future research.

CONCLUSION

Using the issue of overfishing of GSMR's spawning aggregation, this paper showed the ways in which local and global claims to marine resource management come into conflict over how the problem of overfishing is constructed and, in turn, what the solution to the problem is imagined to be. This highlights the fact that one of the key challenges to achieving successful MPA co-management is the negotiation of the differences between local and global perspectives regarding the means to effectively achieving the conservation of marine resources.

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