

Marine protected areas: Perspectives from fishing communities

Chandrika Sharma, International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)

The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) commissioned studies in six countries, that is India, South Africa, Brazil, Tanzania, Thailand and Mexico, to understand the social dimensions of implementing MPAs, with the following specific objectives:

- provide an overview of the legal framework for, and design and implementation of, MPAs;
- document and analyze the experiences and views of local communities, particularly fishing communities, with respect to various aspects of MPA design and implementation; and
- suggest ways in which livelihood concerns can be integrated into the MPA programme of work, identifying, in particular, how local communities, particularly fishing communities, could engage as equal partners in the MPA process.

The studies drew on the following case study locations:

Country	Case Study Locations
Brazil	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peixe Lagoon National Park (Rio Grande do Sul)• MER Mandira (Sao Paulo)• MER Corumbau (Bahia)
India	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gulf of Mannar National Park (GOMNP) and Biosphere Reserve (GOMBR), Tamil Nadu• Malvan (marine) Wildlife Sanctuary, Maharashtra
Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Had Chao Mai Marine National Park, Trang Province, Andaman Coast Thailand• Ra Island – Prathong Island, Prathong Sub- District, Kuraburi District, Phang Nga Province, Andaman Coast
South Africa	Five MPAs in 3 of SA's 4 coastal provinces: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Langebaan Lagoon MPA• Maputaland MPA• St Lucia MPA• Tsitsikamma MPA• Mkambati MPA
Tanzania	Mafia island marine park (MIMP)

They provide useful information about how fishing communities perceive MPAs in each of these locations, whether they feel they are part of the decision-making process and whether they feel they have benefited from the MPA in any way. It also looked at the costs being borne by communities in these MPAs.

The most positive example of livelihood-sensitive conservation is from Brazil, where communities are in the forefront in demanding, and setting up sustainable use Marine Extractive Reserves (MERs). Communities are using protected areas as a tool to protect their livelihoods, as, for example, against shrimp farms and tourism. The Brazil study also highlights the many challenges faced in this process, related, among other things, to need for capacity building of government functionaries and communities, funding, lack of strong community/ fishworker organizations, adopting an interdisciplinary approach, and integration of scientific and traditional knowledge.

The studies from India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, Tanzania and Thailand, and from a no-take MPA in Brazil, on the other hand, indicated that communities do not consider themselves equal partners in the MPA process. While in all cases there have been recent efforts to enhance community participation, in general, participation tends to be instrumental—where communities are expected to participate in implementation, and are not part of the process of designing and implementing management initiatives.

The studies also document clear costs to communities—in terms of livelihood options lost, expulsion from traditional fishing grounds and living spaces, and violation of human/community rights, with few perceived real benefits. Alternative livelihood options that have been put in place are perceived to have provided limited support to affected communities, and in several cases, as in Tanzania, South Africa and Thailand, communities do not perceive benefits from tourism initiatives associated with the protected areas.

There tends to be a resistance to MPAs among local communities, a mistrust of government and NGOs that lead such processes, and violations of rules and regulations, undermining the effectiveness of the MPA itself.

It is important to note that reliable socio-economic baseline data on fishing communities in MPA areas is not available, to be able to monitor whether communities benefit from the MPA process, and whether the MPA process contributes in any way towards improving well being, and in poverty alleviation.

These studies, and examples of conservation and management initiatives undertaken by fishing communities elsewhere, clearly indicate that community-led processes, that draw on community knowledge systems and social institutions are most likely to contribute positively, both to biodiversity conservation and to improving community livelihoods.