December 13 2023

Dear editor,

We are happy to submit our manuscript entitled “Assessing stakeholder perceptions to guide marine social fit of marine protected areas” for consideration as an original research article for the special issue on Sustainable Oceans in a Changing Climate in iScience. This submission follows an initial invitation from Dina Li and Jans Sheba Agarwal and subsequent discussions.

Marine protected areas (MPAs), usually proposed as a “win-win” for people and nature, often lack clearly defined, measurable and locally relevant ecological and social objectives. This is especially true when they are pushed by external actors paying little attention to local contexts, which poses a problem of social-ecological fit. In our study, we develop a framework designed to assess the place-based objectives of MPAs based on the perceptions of local stakeholders and use this framework to study a marine conservation project undertaken in Palawan, Philippines. We show that locally, improving livelihoods and food security are the main concerns for stakeholders who widely agree on the need for more effective management of coastal ecosystems. We believe that this work will provide a timely and valuable contribution to the current discussions on MPA planning and evaluation, and more generally on ocean sustainability.

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity’s Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework recently set the target of conserving 30% of land and ocean by 2030. This should further accelerate an already active momentum of MPA creation throughout the global ocean. The Philippines is located within the coral triangle, one of the richest and most threatened marine ecosystems on the planet. As the country shows a vital dependence on these ecosystems for the food and livelihoods of already marginalized fishing communities and a high commitment towards MPA creation, the conditions in which marine conservation is undertaken will affect millions. It is therefore more than ever urgent to propose ways to guide the creation of more relevant, efficient and just MPAs, in the Philippines and globally.

Finally, this work has a high importance locally as Shark Fin Bay and Palawan are subject to an increasing attention from local governments and international NGOs. Palawan was declared as a UNESCO Man & Biosphere reserve, but is still a data-deficient province. While the main results from this study have translated in concrete propositions and applied to improve local management, our framework could also be used as a blueprint for future conservation work conducted in the province.

We confirm that this work is original and is not under consideration for publication in any other journal. All co-authors agree with the contents of the manuscript and its submission.

On behalf of all the other co-authors, I thank you for your consideration of our manuscript,

Sincerely,

Victor Brun

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