

Midterm Research Report

Research Project: Governance and Social-ecological Interactions: Advancing Top-down Approaches and Engaging Local Communities to Enhance Marine Protected Areas in Colombia

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The ultimate goal of this research is contribute to improving Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) performance in the Caribbean of Colombia to achieve conservation and social objectives. Through the understanding of interactions taking place among coastal communities, environmental authorities, and other key stakeholders around the MPAs as well as the different perceptions that stakeholders have on MPAs, this research aims to identify opportunities and challenges to shift current top-down approaches towards a more integrative and participative mode of management that includes communities knowledge, internal rules, interests, and traditions.

Specifically, this research is focused on the coastal communities living close to four MPAs located in the province of Sucre, Colombian Caribbean. The communities are Ciénaga de la Caimanera (associated to the Regional Management District that takes the same name), the community of Guacamaya (nearby the Regional Natural Park Boca Guacamaya), communities of Berrugas and Rincon del Mar (both of them located close to The Private Reserve Sanguare and The National Natural Park Corales del Rosario and San Bernardo (CRSB)), and the islander community of Santa Cruz del Islote (located in one of the islands of the National Natural Park CRSB) (Figure 1).

The first stage of this research included fieldwork activities carried out during the months of April, May, June, and July of 2014. During this period of time, I conducted 69 semi-structured interviews with diverse participants from the community including elder fishermen, community leaders (male and female), independent fishermen, representatives of environmental authorities at the regional and national level, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and researchers involved in marine conservation (Table 1).

All the activities were facilitated by members from each of the communities. Particularly, the Association of mangrove users of Berrugas (ASOPEMABE) was key to coordinate interviews, focus groups, transportation among sites, and other activities. To have the



Figure 1. Localization of the Marine Protected Areas and coastal communities

Opportunity to be closer to each of the communities and learn more about them, I spent between two and three weeks with each of the communities.

Table 1. List of interviews with local community members.

Site	Interviews with local community members
Tolu	3
Ciénaga de la Caimanera	9
Boca Guacamaya	11
Santa Cruz del Islote	14
Berrugas	9
Rincon del Mar	9
Regional Environmental Authority-Carsucre	3
Fundacion Sabanas NGO	2
Institute of Marine and Coastal Research-Invemar	2
The Caribbean Regional System of Protected Areas -Sirap Caribe	1
National Parks System-PNN	3
Fundacion Maria Mulata, NGO. Rincon del Mar	1
Sanguare	1
Ecoversa NGO	1

Focus groups were carried out with members of the communities in each site. The focus groups were conducted in Ciénaga de la Caimanera (2), Boca Guacamaya (1), Berrugas (1), Rincon del Mar (1), and Santa Cruz del Isote (1). The number of participants in the focus groups was around six people. The focus groups were organized with the help of community leaders in charge of inviting participants and coordinating logistic aspects of the activity (meeting space/food).

The focus groups offered an interesting opportunity not only to collect specific information about the perception of the communities on marine protected areas, but also as a space for interchanging ideas and reflecting on natural resources use changes.

In addition to the interviews and focus groups, I had the opportunity to take part in several observation activities such as fishing, meetings, informal conversations, etc. with members of the community. Other complementary activities carried out during the field trip were keeping notes from the field, registering observations, attending meetings with organizations, reviewing information from libraries, and meeting people working in protected areas management in Colombia. In July, I participated in the Colombian National Congress of Protected Areas, where I presented preliminary results and acknowledged The Robin Rigby Trust as the main source of funding of this research.



1. Interview in Natural Private Reserve Sanguare.



2. Participating/observing fishing activities near to Tolu.

At this point in time, the main fieldwork objectives have been met. A follow up on some interviews and focus groups will be pursued in the next and final visit to the field with the purpose of clarifying some aspects.

Regarding to other research activities, interviews and focus groups transcriptions are now completed. A first coding round of all interviews and focus groups transcripts was also accomplished obtaining the identification of main interactions, beliefs, traditions, among other key aspects related to the use and regulations of marine resources in the study sites.

Community engagement

As mentioned previously, members from all the coastal communities involved in this study have been key for the development of this research. Having established previous connections with Asopemabe made easier to develop trust and a respectful relationship with leaders from other local organizations and participants. Field activities were an opportunity for community members to dialogue and express their points of view about conservation strategies in the area and resource use. It was also an opportunity to reflect on ecosystems and resources changes as well as fishing technologies. Particularly, questions posed during the focus groups drove to the identification of present and historical causes of marine resource degradation. Collective thinking through focus groups helped to identify different perceptions among participants.



3. "Pescadoras" Women selling fish in San Onofre near Berrugas.



4. Meeting with community leaders in Rincon del Mar.



5. Fish caught by three family members with fishing line during three hours of effort.

Challenges

While accessing community members and getting interviews with participants from the coastal communities was extremely easy, getting and coordinating appointments with

environmental authorities, private stakeholders, and non-governmental organizations was very challenging. Private stakeholders were reluctant to participate in interviews and asked to follow a particular protocol before accepting to be part of the research. Although after several months of providing information and following up the interview was authorized, it has not been possible to set an appointment to conduct the interview yet. Environmental authorities, NGOs, and other stakeholders related to marine conservation were willing to be interviewed; however, it was difficult to book an appointment. At the end, several of these interviews were conducted through skype.

As mentioned above, participants from the coastal communities were very open and willing to participate in the research. However, sometimes it was challenging to make arrangements for interviews times due to their job activities. Particularly, the field work period coincided with the vacation period of schools in Colombia which is a busy tourist time when coastal communities take advantage of the seasonal job opportunities. Additionally, the field work coincided with the World Soccer Cup where the Colombian soccer Team participated. During the soccer games, while the Colombian team played, the country was paralyzed so it was impossible to carry out any activity that required the participation of the community. I had to learn how to deal with last minute cancelations or un-scheduled interviews which required a lot of flexibility and adaptability of my part.

Next Steps

Analysis of data will be continued during the next three months aiming to be finalized by April/2015 before the second trip to the field in May/2015. This field work trip will have the purpose of disseminate preliminary results to the five coastal communities that participate in this study as well as to environmental authorities, and NGOs. The goal of the dissemination of results is receiving feedback from the communities and other participants, addressing their concerns, and allowing time to include their observations in the final version of the thesis. For the next field work trip, I expect to work again with the members of the community that facilitated the previous field work activities.