

30 by 30

Renewed calls for marine conservation must not bulldoze the democratic route that has allowed small island nations to improve fisheries and incomes without damaging the marine ecology

I wanted to share some concerns regarding the danger that threatens to disrupt the management of the Pacific Islands' signature fisheries and main independent source of income. There have been renewed calls for 30 per cent marine protected areas (MPAs) that sound suspiciously over-simplistic. Community-conserved areas come at many scales and the Pacific Islands' chances of ensuring a multinational indigenous conserved area are threatened.

The Pacific Islands are made up of 14 nations governed since their independence by indigenous inhabitants whose stewardship extends to an area of ocean that is 300 times larger than their land mass. Straddling these remote stretches of ocean, life has always depended on intimate traditional knowledge and rights systems over coastal areas. These rights systems have also formally extended to the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of island countries since the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and independence.

One of the major ocean resources are the migratory tuna; over half the world's stocks swim through the contiguous EEZs of the island countries. Until 2010 the island countries were ruthlessly exploited by distant-water fishing states in a system condoned by major developed nations. This saw less than 10 per cent of the value remaining in the islands.

Rich fishing grounds

In coastal areas, Pacific Island communities have been able to demonstrate to the world that building on local rights over inshore waters and using combinations of traditional and modern approaches is a solid basis for coastal fisheries management. Thousands of communities are practising this already to a greater or lesser extent. Nearly a thousand have actually been recorded as doing so and there is no real reason that most of the Pacific Islands communities will not be

doing this in the future, if they are not already. The key ingredients for this are recognizing local rights, empowering communities to build on local needs and strengths, and not prescribing what they should do from the outside. Conservation and management of these community 'owned' areas can be achieved but if a generalization can be made, then 100 per cent of the area needs to be appropriately managed; targeting 30 per cent seems inequitable and does not make ecological or management sense. (What about all the other communities?)

In a true revolution that mirrors the traditional inshore experiences, the island nations through which most of the tuna swim have been able to build on the existing rights regime afforded by UNCLOS, choosing management methods that meet their objectives. These are not necessarily those promoted by the 'experts'. They have also pooled their combined EEZs to set up a shared system of management that covers all the tuna that swim through their countries. The tool used

The Pacific Islands are made up of 14 nations governed since their independence by indigenous inhabitants whose stewardship extends to an area of ocean that is 300 times larger than their land mass.

is the Vessel Day Scheme, an effort-control method used by the community of countries known as the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA).

The system is akin to a cartel and allows island countries to set rules and prices to which fishing companies have to accede if they wish to use some of the world's richest fishing grounds. The system is so effective that in fewer than 10 years benefit from access fees alone have increased by a factor of five to around 25 per cent of the value of the fish. Importantly, the system has also allowed countries to close fishing in

*This article is by **Hugh Govan** (hgovan@gmail.com), Technical Advisor to the Locally-Managed Marine Area (LMMA) Network*

FRANCISCO BLAHA



Off loading tuna at the Mua-i-walu wharf in Fiji. Threats in the EEZs from industrial fishing can most effectively be dealt with through strict fishing regulation and full observer coverage.

54

parts of the high seas as a condition of access. This is important as regulations are weaker in the high seas and the benefits do not accrue to the island nations. Thus far, the sustainability of the four major stocks of tuna is stable, according to scientists.

The system is the best method of managing these tuna stocks so far. Quotas have failed as elsewhere and MPAs would not be a method of choice for such highly migratory species. A key concern is to further restrict, or prohibit altogether, fishing in the high seas where the regime is less strict and not very accountable to the island nations. So considerable efforts are made to ensure that fishing remains attractive in the EEZs. Ideally, the ongoing negotiations on the high seas could strongly restrict fishing there or even declare the high seas a 100 per cent MPA.

Threats in the EEZs to tuna and other migratory species from industrial fishing can largely and most effectively be dealt with through strict fishing regulation and full observer coverage. Apart for some small areas of specific interest (sea mounts) the major threats to these large expanses of ocean are also transboundary, such as the impacts of global climate change or pollution. Large MPAs in these cash-strapped countries do not generally make

sense compared to other management options and the need to focus on the vitally important and biodiverse inshore areas that local people depend on for daily livelihoods.

Worse still, removing significant proportions—30 per cent or more—of the EEZs from the shared ‘community’ management system reduces the incentive of fishers to engage with the PNA community as it shrinks the resource that the island nations have to offer. This increases the likelihood that effort will shift to less controlled areas in the high seas where only rich corporations/nations will benefit, ultimately breaking the PNA system.

It is very disappointing to observe that conservation organizations and others have not commissioned public studies to either verify or rebut these concerns before promoting an approach that disproportionately affects island nations. Sure, simplistic panaceas make better campaigns. But the potential for harnessing solidarity and joining forces on the major issues facing the ocean are undermined by the lack of discussion or sensitivity to the smallest nations’ desire to figure out sustainability for themselves and, in the process, become less dependent on external ‘benefactors’.

I look forward to discussion on this and would ask for moderation in supporting calls for 30 per cent of the oceans to be made MPAs—the same goes for 30 per cent of local areas—until these issues are addressed.

For more

https://www.usp.ac.fj/fileadmin/files/Institutes/piasdg/SGDIA/SGDIA_WP_Series_2017/SGDIA_WP3_-_Brief_-_Hugh_Govan-Final1.pdf

From Locally Managed Marine Areas to Indigenous and Community Conserved Oceans.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0_H-Pi4pRUucm1Xa3pGSVo3dlU/view

Mining in the Cook Islands MPA?

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/27/palau-marine-sanctuary-backfires-leading-to-increased-consumption-of-reef-fish>

Palau’s marine sanctuary backfires, leading to increased consumption of reef fish

<https://isidore.science/document/10670/1.qugfj4>

The other side of large-scale, no-take, marine protected areas in the Pacific Ocean