

Reserving a Role for Communities

Communities, if seen as rights holders, can be powerful allies in conservation and management of coastal and marine resources through protected areas

In 2004, Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) set themselves the goal of effectively conserving at least 10 per cent of the world's marine and coastal ecological regions by 2012. According to recent estimates, less than one per cent of the waters under national jurisdiction are under protection. Undoubtedly, this decision has implications for small-scale fishing coastal communities, the primary traditional users of coastal and marine areas.

Coastal fishing communities, threatened as they are by biodiversity loss and degradation of coastal ecosystems, have been demanding effective action to protect and manage coastal and marine habitats and resources. In several parts of the world, they have been known to take their own initiatives to protect and manage their resources, given the close links between their livelihoods and the health of the resource base.

Clearly, communities can be powerful allies in efforts for conservation and management of coastal and marine resources. Problems arise, however, due to conservation approaches with pre-determined agendas that serve to alienate indigenous and local fishing communities. The current target orientation in some countries to expand areas under marine protected areas (MPAs), while short-circuiting participatory processes, is a case in point. Not surprisingly, such approaches are proving ineffective from the perspective of both conservation and livelihood.

Empowering indigenous and local fishing communities to progressively share the responsibility of managing coastal and fisheries resources, in keeping with Programme Element 2 on Governance, Participation, Equity and Benefit Sharing in CBD's Programme of Work on Protected Areas (Annex to Decision VII/28), would undoubtedly meet the goals of both conservation and poverty reduction (see Statement by Indigenous people, local communities and traditional

fisherfolks to the "Anglophone Africa Subregional Workshop on the Review of, and Capacity Building for, the Implementation of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas", pg. 37).

For this, however, much work remains to be done in ensuring that provisions in existing international legal instruments supporting the rights of indigenous and small-scale fishing communities with respect to conservation initiatives, are reflected

in national legislation, policy and practice. In particular, there is a need to recognize the traditional and customary rights of fishing communities to resources, as well their rights to engage in responsible fisheries, in keeping with the principle of sustainable use of biodiversity.

Communities traditionally dependent on the resource base

must be seen as rights holders in decision-making processes. This means that the choice of appropriate management/conservation tools, objectives and plans, governance structures, provisions for community representation, and implementation and monitoring, should be decided in consultation with local communities, and the governance structure itself ought to represent the various social groups within the community, including women.

As important is the need to adopt appropriate strategies and tools within a wider marine and coastal management framework. Establishing MPAs is pointless if, for example, pollution and uncontrolled development continue to jeopardize the health of coastal and marine ecosystems at the larger level. This was highlighted by participants, including representatives of fishing-community organizations, at a recent workshop on marine reserves in India (see "Declaration of Charter", pg. 47).

As CBD's Working Group on Protected Areas meets in Rome, Italy from 13 to 17 February 2008, it would do well to take note of these issues. The future of both effective conservation and millions of livelihoods is at stake.

