

MPA Perspective: Integrating a Community-Based MPA Network at the Barangay Level in the Philippines

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By Jan-Willem van Bochove

Near Padre Burgos, a coastal municipality in the province of Southern Leyte, Philippines, fish stocks have declined dramatically in recent years. Although local reefs boast high coral cover and diversity, they support low numbers of commercially targeted fish. Pressure on marine resources is enormous, with exponential growth in the human population: the average family size is eight or more individuals. Fishers in super-light vessels, frustrated with disappointing catches close to home, have been venturing farther out under the cover of night to target the remaining large fish in the area.

Six years ago, to tackle these issues, the provincial government invited Coral Cay Conservation (CCC) - a UK-based conservation NGO - to assess Southern Leyte's coastal resources. Together with the Provincial Environmental and Natural Resources Management Office (PENRMO), CCC would develop a coastal resource management plan.

In addition to community awareness campaigns and local capacity-building, CCC viewed the creation of a network of community-based no-take MPAs as an important step in this process. In the Philippines, local-level politics govern the placement of marine protected areas, and hundreds of community-based MPAs have been designated over the past three decades. Unfortunately, in the case of many of these sites, poor management and a lack of community involvement have given them a reputation among fishermen of being a hindrance rather than a practical solution for dealing with declining fish catches.

To change this perception, CCC invited municipal representatives and local leaders on a trip to an MPA on Apo Island, in the province of Negros Oriental. The excursion gave these officials a chance to share experiences with the local Apo leader and get a first-hand glimpse of this successful community-based MPA. It sparked the enthusiasm and encouragement needed to help pave the way to community-managed, and community-supported, no-take zones back home.

Upon their return to Padre Burgos, the officials shared what they had witnessed on their trip to Apo. It did not take long to put together a plan to establish four MPAs, with one sited in each of four local communities, or *barangays*, in the municipality. CCC organized workshops to outline the potential benefits to fisherfolk. Lengthy discussions about the costs and benefits of MPAs were held between the barangay captains and their people. Barangay captains control local-level politics, and the success or demise of coastal resource management on the barangay level hinges on a captain's support, vision, and charisma.

Proposed locations of the MPAs were carefully coordinated with the community to avoid placement over important fishing grounds or boat passageways, while targeting the areas of healthiest reef - both to facilitate rapid stock recovery and provide good diving opportunities to attract tourism. CCC volunteers conducted scientific surveys to establish baseline data and, later, annual data on the abundance of fish and general reef health. These data were presented to the community through simple bar charts and pie graphs. (Regular meetings with barangay representatives and fisherfolk are an essential way to show support to their efforts and address any issues that may arise.) The barangays eventually designated all four MPAs.

The MPAs cover about one-fifth of the Padre Burgos coastline. Local dive resorts have shown their support through annual monetary contributions to support guardhouses in the MPAs, and fuel costs for a patrol boat. Divers are happy to support the communities' efforts by paying a \$1 dive fee.

Already the small network of MPAs in Padre Burgos has shown remarkable success: biomass of targeted fish species has increased in the MPAs, as has live hard coral cover. The number of divers visiting Padre Burgos has increased as well. The sites have helped create a new sense of awareness within the community - that there are solutions to an increasingly desperate situation. Other barangays are following their lead: on the nearby island of Limasawa, an 85-hectare MPA is set for designation. Communities are realizing that divers are prepared to pay for diving on well-managed reefs.

It has been said many times before that for an MPA to succeed, there needs to be significant community support. MPA establishment is relatively easy; the real challenge arises a year or two later when fishers have yet to see significant changes, or when a new barangay captain is installed who doesn't understand or support the MPA. It is important to continually provide support and share findings with these communities at meetings. For example, CCC organized a follow-up field trip in 2007 where the same municipal representatives from Padres Burgos were taken to urban MPAs of Mactan Island, in the province of Cebu. The group gathered ideas there on how to develop a better dive user-fee system for their MPAs and more cost-effective ways of management.

For more information

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