Impediments to local management of coral reefs: Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve, Bay Islands, Honduras

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ABSTRACT

Sandy Bay-West End, located on the north coast of Roatán, on the Bay Islands of Honduras, is the site of a spectacular and biologically diverse coral reef ecosystem. This case study describes the development of a management plan for the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve which is under the management of a local NGO, the Bay Islands Conservation Association (BICA). Unfortunately, most of the poor and middle-income islanders feel estranged from BICA’s goals and objectives. BICA has not made the effort to address the socio-economic concerns of the Bay Islanders regarding the allocation and use of coastal and marine resources. Also, the fact that the families of the two highest officers are major stakeholders in Roatán’s tourism industry adds to the skepticism of the Islanders about the BICA’s motives. Additionally, the source of BICA’s funds for managing the Reserve is from the Hotel Association, which is an immediate conflict of interest, allowing one stakeholder group to dominate through financial patronage and whose interests are allowed to prevail. A review of a survey conducted by Wildlife Conservation Society indicates that BICA must begin to make fundamental changes in its governance style and financial arrangements. Considering the mistrust of the management entity, unilateral decision-making and poor communications between the stakeholders it will take several years for BICA to regain the trust of local residents and fully engage the stakeholders.

Keywords Central America, Coastal management, Community participation, Marine protected areas

Introduction

Located approximately 60 km north of the Honduras mainland, the Bay Islands form a chain of about 70 cays and three main islands: Utila, Roatán, and Guanaja. The Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve extends from the northwest coast of Roatán from Lawson’s Rock around West Point End to the southwest side of the island to Key Hole. The Reserve is under the management of a local NGO, the Bay Islands Conservation Association (BICA). Two management plans have been developed for the Reserve. The first is the Plan for the Management and Development for the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve, commissioned by a Sandy Bay resort owner as a result of 1997 permit condition. The second is the “Management Plan and Operational Plan for the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve” (MPOP) prepared by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). In 1982, the Government of Honduras declared the Bay Islands a Tourist Zone. Although coastal regulations and agencies to protect the coastal, marine and terrestrial environments have existed since 1991, the reefs have suffered greatly due to increased development and resource use (Sorensen 1992). While compliance to the regulations has increased, the number and severity of environmental impacts on the Islands, specifically, the island of Roatán has also increased (Forest, 1995, 1998). If these conditions persist, loss of tourism due to the degradation of the corals would place the Bay Islands at a comparative disadvantage to other dive destinations in the Caribbean. As the coral reefs degrade, the quality of recreation will also degrade.

Historic and Cultural Context

The current friction between the Spanish-speaking Ladinos from the mainland and the English-speaking Isleños, is a manifestation of 400 years of Anglo-Hispanic conflict (Davidson 1988). This history presents a state of affairs in the political and cultural relationships on the island. It is a contentious situation that must be recognized and explicitly acknowledged in the implementation of coastal and marine management programs in the Bay Islands.

There are three main groups on the islands: The Garífuna were the first permanent group to arrive on the islands. The second group the Isleños are of English descent. The third, and the most recent group to arrive are the Ladinos from the mainland and immigrants from other Central American countries.

The Garífuna were the first group to form a settlement in the Bay Islands that remains until today. They originated over 300 years ago on Saint Vincent Island and Dominica in the Lesser Antilles. In 1797, approximately 5,000 were transported by the English and brought to Roatán. Those who remained, settled along the north shore of the island in Punta Gorda, where most of the Island Garífuna continue to reside.

For at least a decade after 1516, the Islanders were subjected to Spanish slave expeditions. Between 1528 and 1782, Spanish withdrawal and reoccupation by the English recurred three times, leaving, significant Anglo-Hispanic conflicts in the islands (Davidson 1988). On September 15, 1821, Honduras declared their independence from Spain. In 1859, the Wykes-Cruz Treaty between Honduras and Great Britain recognized Honduran sovereignty over the Bay Islands. However, English persistence and the inability of Spain to settle the

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2 The ladinos began arriving on the Bay Islands during Central America’s civil war in the 1980’s.
islands resulted in the establishment of the English-speaking Isleños who had more interest in remaining part of the British Empire than becoming part of Honduras. Today, regardless of their ancestry, many proudly refer to themselves as either as British rather than Honduran or Isleños (Bay Islanders) rather than Hondurans (Forest 1998).

The migration of Spanish-speaking Ladinos the third group on the Islands, has escalated the population to a level at which the Island’s fresh water supply, food and land resources are being jeopardized. The deteriorating economic conditions on the mainland and in Central America, have stimulated the migration of thousands poor individuals and families to the Bay Islands looking for jobs in the tourist, fishing or construction industries.

Community Participation and Stakeholder Relationships

People who live along the coast and have traditionally used coastal resources are directly affected by new conservation rules and procedures and must be involved in the formation of new coastal policies and resource use if they are to support them. Redistribution of power is key to equity in decision-making. Both central and local governments and powerful interest groups may limit the extent of local empowerment and participation if they perceive a threat to their own authority. However, access to participation is not enough. Participation involves how the right stakeholders will be chosen to take part in the planning process. Who participates and how, are crucial to success. According to a representative of the Bay Islands Association of Native Workers and Professionals, they never hear of upcoming civic meetings or the formation of task forces. The members of these committee task forces are "recycled". The same people serve on almost all the committees and make decisions benefiting themselves: large landowners, business people and local administrators.

Political Culture of a Closed Decision-making Process

Historically in developing countries, political decisions are made top-down incorporating what is known as a closed decision-making process (Gamman 1994). As a country governs itself according to its traditions and cultures, they affect decision-making in the management of natural and human resources. The beliefs that relate to the public policy process include: perceptions about the effectiveness of the government and its leaders; the acceptance of laws and regulations; and how a community accepts or rejects the role of government in their personal lives. On Roatán, unequal income distributions and power structures have existed for generations between the different groups of Islanders. Personal affiliations, powerful interest groups, and party loyalties are part of the culture of policy-making. Those who are marginalized from the process come to believe this is how decisions are made and any effort to become part of this process is futile. Determining who has access to power, how they use that access, how they influence decision-making and the relationship between the different interest groups are very important factors.

Management Plan and Operation Plan for the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve

There are two management plans being developed for the Bay Islands. One is a plan for establishment of the Bay Islands National Marine Park. The other is a Management Plan and Operational Plan for the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve (MPOP). The Bay Islands National Marine Park Plan is a component of an Inter-American Development (IDB) project. In 1994 the IDB approved a $US 27 million loan to prepare the Programa de Ordenamiento Ambiental de las Islas de la Bahía-- Program for the Environmental Management of the Bay Islands (PROAMIB). One of the goals is to protect and manage the marine resources by legally establishing a system of marine parks.

The MPOP is funded through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In 1997, a local NGO, the Bay Island Conservation Association (BICA) received funding from Fundación VIDA and from USAID and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) as a US NGO. The project’s main objective is to promote the conservation of the Bay Islands natural and marine resources through establishment and management of the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve. In July 1999, WCS released for review the “Management Plan and Operational Plan for the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve”.

Issues

The Bay Islands Conservation Association (BICA) was established in 1990 at the initiative of a group of Island residents concerned with environmental conservation of the Islands. In 1991 BICA received a request to direct and manage the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve. In 1996, BICA was entrusted by the Government of Honduras to officially manage the Reserve.

BICA has done a commendable job of initiating environmental education programs, coordinating beach cleanups and providing input in the environmental review process for coastal development permits. However, most of the poor and middle-income islanders feel estranged from BICA’s goals and objectives. BICA has not made the effort to address the socio-economic concerns of the Bay Islanders regarding the allocation and use of coastal and marine resources (Stonich 1998). Also, the fact that the families of the two highest officers are major stakeholders in Roatán’s tourism industry adds to the skepticism of the local people about the BICA’s motives. Additionally, the Hoteleros de Roatán, provides financial support to BICA to protect the reefs in the Reserve, thereby creating an immediate conflict of interest, allowing the Hoteleros de Roatán, to dominate through financial patronage and whose interests are allowed to prevail. The perception of the poor who depend upon the resources from the Reserve, is that they are being asked to restrict environmentally damaging activities (e.g.
harvesting of conch, fish and lobster) while the illegal activities of the wealthy and powerful continue unchallenged (e.g. dredging, construction in the mangroves) (Alevizon 1994). Penalties such as fines for violations within the Reserve appear to be imposed on a selective basis. There seems to be reluctance to pursue certain projects or violators. Work has continued on large and highly visible environmentally destructive projects (e.g. marina construction and hotels) while small projects with minor violations (e.g. dock extensions) have been given cease and desist orders (Forest 1998).

The long delays of the IDB/PROAMIB, the history of animosity, distrust and poor communications between the stakeholders have adversely affected the current efforts of the WCS-USAID team to fully involve the stakeholders. The Atlantic Islanders, regardless of their socio-economic status, have indicated that they were tired of studies and consultants. “They [consultants] come and go and we still have the problems that we have to live with” (Forest 1998). The latest information is that IDB has frozen payments to the European-Honduran consortium implementing the protected area component of the project, and one year after arriving on Roatán they have yet to begin funding reef conservation efforts.

UCS-USAID Management Plan Survey

In a survey conducted by WCS in preparing the MPOP, 43 individuals were asked to comment on the following three aspects: 1) permitted activities within specific zones; 2) the locations and sizes of the zones; and 3) the concept of user fees as a financing strategy for operation and maintenance. However, the survey field notes also recorded comments not specific to the three management issues in the plan. More than 50 percent expressed concern about ineffective enforcement and the need for stronger and more equitable enforcement within the Reserve. Specific concerns include:

- Ineffective patrolling in the Reserve, (“Poachers wait for the reserve boat to go by, then they pull out no-night patrols”);
- Inability of guards to communicate in English with tourist—particularly divers and snorkellers;
- Selective use of arrests, (“They let off their own people but arrest Islanders”);
- Reluctance of the guards to perform their jobs in a professional manner, (“I see the guards sitting around under the trees with the radio turned off…they hang around the dock for hours…”);
- Disagreement over hired staff from outside the community, (“Reserve guards should be hired from people who live and work around this end of the island and know the water conditions”);

Thirty-three percent of the respondents expressed concerns over the conflicts between BICA and the communities:

- The lack of unity between BICA, the user groups and the marine reserve staff, (“Neither local or business people are motivated to work together on the situation or attend community meetings”);
- Lack of community respect of BICA, (“BICA doesn’t represent the community anymore”);
- Inadequate surveillance, (“Do they [guards] exist? Do they have boats? What do they do?”);
- Unilateral decision-making, (“…one person makes all the decisions without answering to anyone”).

Recommendations

The survey responses indicated that the problems are clearly far more complicated than simply determining zoning or boundary limits, or the means or amount of fee collection. It is apparent from the WCS survey that BICA must begin to make fundamental changes in its governance style and arrangements. In order for BICA to be accountable for management decisions, it is necessary that: 1) the decision-making process be transparent; 2) the resource users are equitably represented on the Board of Directors and allowed to freely participate in decision-making; and 3) there is a provision for an independent process of BICA’s decisions.

A number of recommendations were suggested by individuals who own business or reside in the communities adjacent to the Marine Reserve:

- Consider appointing representatives outside of the diving community (e.g. fishermen and taxi boat operators) to serve on BICA’s Marine Reserve Board;
- Elect a Board of Directors, who are familiar with the dynamics of the reef, are knowledgeable about the resources and will be actively involved in the management process;
- Reorganization of management should strongly consider allowing the Board of Directors to have autonomy in order to conduct the day-to-day management of the Reserve. The role of BICA as the designated entity by the Honduran should be that of overall long-term administration and coordination with other national institutions, the Departamento de las Islas de la Bahía and the Roatán municipality and other national institutions; and finally
- Commitment at the national level to be accountable for management decisions.

Lessons Learned

An important lesson to be learned from the Bay Islands experience is that constituency building and accountability of decisions are crucial and dual steps in the planning and acceptance of a management program for marine protected areas. In the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve, lack of community participation, selective allocation and lack of access to resources have contributed to the political imbalance and polarization of the Bay Islanders. This has resulted in decisions that have generated adverse environmental, political and socio-economic impacts of a greater magnitude than
would have occurred with an open process (Forest 1995, 1998).

A second lesson is that even the best intentions and efforts to provide an open process of planning and decision-making, can be adversely affected by a long history of mistrust of a management entity based on years of poor communication, ineffective leadership and unilateral decision-making. On Roatán, if consensus building had been incorporated, the intense conflicts among the resource users could have avoided; as well as actions or perceptions of favoritism and inequity. Management initiatives must reach a consensus, otherwise, regulations will be viewed as punitive, burdensome, unreasonable, and inequitable (Forest 2000).

In all likelihood, the MPOP will eventually be implemented. However, until the negative perceptions and attitudes surrounding BICA and its management approaches are resolved and the community feels that management is equitable and responsive to their needs, the following scenarios can be expected:

- Continued lack of respect for the management plan and the management entity;
- Escalating conflicts among all the stakeholders;
- Further degradation of the marine and coastal resources; and
- Decline in the quality of life for Bay Islanders who depend upon the resources of the reserve.

Current Status of the Management Plan and Operational Plan

WCS is continuing to work with the Sandy Bay and West End communities in modifying the Reserve management plan to re-establish links between the benefits of the reserve and the community and to re-establish links between the benefits of the Reserve and the community, and to re-establish cooperation between BICA and the communities. The MPOP was expected to be approved by early 2001 (MPA News 2000).

Conclusion

Resolving the problems of managing the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve is a challenging and long-term task. Considering the mistrust of the management entity and inadequate leadership that began long before the WCS-USAID (or the IDB-PROAMIB) planning process was underway, it will take several years for BICA to regain the trust of local residents. The intent of the WCS-led team is to encourage and provide the means by which the less powerful stakeholders can demand accountability for management decisions, can collectively contribute in the planning efforts and create a context that allows for ventilation of issues. Additionally, the WCS team's efforts to facilitate a highly participatory planning process, can be the opportunity for all stakeholders to send a clear message of the intent to take action and responsibility to manage the resources in a cooperative/consensus-based manner that contributes long-term social and economic benefits to the community members.

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