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Informal governance through patron–client relationships and destructive fishing in Spermonde Archipelago, Indonesia

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Abstract Efforts to preserve fragile ecosystems that focus on removing human intervention from the environment risk ignoring the political and social systems underlying environmentally destructive economic activities. In contrast, a biocultural diversity perspective allows for environmental protection to be approached with sensitivity to human needs. This paper explores the case of Karanrang Island, Spermonde Archipelago, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where fishing with toxins and bombs is proving detrimental to fish stocks and the surrounding coral reefs. Interviews with Karanrang fishers reveal that these destructive fishing practices are bound up with the region's *punggawa-sawi* political and social system of patron–client relationships. The paper shows how the informal governance operating through these patron–client relationships traps fishers into destructive fishing practices. It is argued that environmental protection efforts should take into account political and social contexts.

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Introduction

This paper discusses the intersection between an informal governance system and environmental protection in a small Indonesian fishing community. Through an examination of the case of Karanrang Island, Indonesia, we will draw conclusions on the how local politics and society can affect attempts to protect the environment.

Recent research has placed focus on the importance of biocultural diversity – that is, on the links between biological diversity and cultural diversity “in landscapes where traditional livelihoods, and ultimately human survival, are based on natural resources” (Hong, 2013). This recognition of the role of people in the environment and *vice versa* presents a remedy to the ‘classic’ environmental conservation approach of seeking to remove humans from the environment. By seeking to bypass the tension that can exist between local human and environmental needs (see, for example, Hayward and Mosse, 2012), this latter approach risks privileging the metropolitan and urban experience at the expense of rural and peripheral society. ‘Classic’ approaches to conservation also

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posit an ideal state for the ecosystem absent human intervention, which – though perhaps partially achievable at an ultra-local scale – ignores the wider flows of capital, labour, power, and pollution that threaten the sustainability of even the best cordoned-off nature reserves and marine protection areas. There is, furthermore, considerable evidence that, besides being ethically questionable, environmental conservation tactics that do not seek to engage with affected human communities are often exercises in failure (Szuster and Albasri, 2010). Even when an environmental conservation project is successful, failure to take local cultural values into account can risk the sustainability of the environmental protection measure itself as the local society comes under pressure due its exclusion from traditional human–environment practices and interactions (Okano and Matsuda, 2013).

A focus on legalistic solutions to environmental conservation may fail to effectively protect the ecosystem in question if they ignore the root causes of the unsustainable human behaviour. Bioculturally sensitive conservation strategies that take a “holistic” approach to environmental protection (Makhzoumi et al., 2012) may have better success in safeguarding both environmental and human needs. Along these lines, the present paper explores the case of Karanrang Island in the Spermonde Archipelago, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where action is necessary to preserve a coral reef ecosystem – which forms the bedrock of the local economy – from the detrimental effects of human activity but where legalistic conservation tactics are proving ineffective. We will highlight how patron–client relationships have created a local system of informal governance that encourages destructive fishing practices.

Environmentally unsustainable practices represent an immediate economic threat to communities that are directly dependent on exploitation of local natural resources. We shall argue, however, that policies focused on combatting unsustainable natural resource exploitation by local communities may miss the point, for such practices are tied up with wider political, social, and economic realities.

Environment and economy of the Spermonde Archipelago, Indonesia

Indonesia is the world’s largest and most populous archipelago. The country’s tropical location, long coastline (81,000 km), and massive marine territory (5.8 million km²) result in Indonesian waters possessing a spectacular level of marine biodiversity, which can be said to represent an inherent environmental good. Expanses of mangrove forest in Indonesia’s coastal waters serve as natural breakwaters and help protect the land from the onslaught of waves, lessening erosion. The mangrove forests also protect coral reefs by filtering and neutralising toxic chemicals from shore before they reach the oceanic ecosystem.

Indonesia is highly dependent on its marine economy. Besides an increasing reliance on fish and shrimp farming (mariculture), which have proved destructive to the mangrove forests over recent decades, the country possesses a substantial offshore fishing industry. Together, mariculture and fishing help fuel Indonesia’s wider economy by generating foreign exchange through exports. Farmed fish and shrimp are exported for foreign consumption, and the reefs themselves are a major source of live food fish and ornamental aquarium fish globally. The health of the mangrove and coral reef ecosys-

tems is thus of direct importance to the country’s economy as a whole, even disregarding their intangible environmental value or their value to the economy’s secondary sector.

Fishing also plays a vital role in the local context, being the major source of employment and food for local consumption in many of Indonesia’s coastal communities. Around 60% of Indonesia’s population lives and works near the coast. Indonesia’s coastal settlements are economically and socially vulnerable, with high population densities placing pressure on local ecosystems and contributing to poor health due to limited access to clean water, sanitation, and health facilities. In addition, most people in coastal areas are vulnerable to floods and storms. Even the level of education in coastal areas is lower than that in inland areas as a whole.

These problems are exacerbated in the case of rural or peripheral coastal communities. In a large archipelagic state like Indonesia, many such communities are located a considerable distance from and possess difficult access to major population centres, resulting in local economies that are dependent on very narrow import and export streams and are thus highly vulnerable to the vagaries of external supply and demand.

This is evident in the case of the island of Karanrang (population around 2960), located in the Spermonde Archipelago (population around 100,000) off the coast of Sulawesi Island. The majority of Karanrang Islanders are of Bugis–Makassar ethnicity and speak the Makassar language. Karanrang can be reached by a 2–3 h motor boat trip from port city of Makassar, capital of the South Sulawesi province. Makassar is the largest city of Sulawesi Island, with a population of over 1.3 million, and there is a sense in which its size exacerbates Karanrang’s isolation, for from the perspective of a Makassar resident, Karanrang is a place of very little importance. As part of the Pangkep District, Karanrang is administered by a municipal government based on the South Sulawesi mainland, but some police officers and minor government officials are also resident on the island of Barrang Lompo, around 22 km from Karanrang. Karanrang is thus in a position of multiple peripherality, affected by the complex dynamics of archipelagic travel and transport (see, for example, Grydehøj and Hayward, 2014; Spilanis et al., 2012).

Destructive fishing practices in Spermonde

Indonesia has genuine problems enforcing its fishery zone, and there is significant illegal fishing by foreign-flagged vessels. The present article, however, focuses on illegal fishing carried out by Spermonde islanders themselves.

Spermonde’s coral reef ecosystem is threatened not just by ‘overfishing’ in an abstract sense but also by particular destructive fishing practices: the use of toxins (potassium cyanide) and bombs that destroy marine life.

The use of explosives (blast fishing) has a long history in Indonesia, dating back to at least World War II, when fishers were taught the technique by Japanese soldiers. However, the actual technology involved in blast fishing has changed over the years, shifting from dynamite to industrial explosives to fertiliser-and-kerosene bombs (Pet-Soede and Erdmann, 1998a, pp. 4–5). Blast fishing has the advantage of saving considerably on labour. Bombs are, however, dangerous to the fishers themselves, resulting in frequent physical injuries. They are also expensive: In their 1997 study, Pet-Soede and

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