Dispossession and disenchantment: The micropolitics of marine conservation in southeastern Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Advocates of marine biodiversity conservation have intensified their calls for the rapid expansion of marine protected areas (MPAs) across the globe, while researchers continue to examine why some people in affected communities support MPAs and others oppose them. Drawing on an ethnographic study of dispossession and the micropolitics of marine conservation in southeastern Tanzania, this paper examines the local dynamics pertaining to the Mnazi Bay-Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park (MBREMP) in rural Mtwara on Tanzania's border with Mozambique. In-depth interviews with 160 individuals and eight focus group discussions with 48 participants were conducted in four sea-bordering villages. By analyzing the narratives of people living in the MBREMP's catchment area regarding their lived experiences with the MBREMP, the paper highlights inter-village and intra-village similarities and differences in the perceived significance and social impact of the MBREMP. Through narratives, people revealed their feelings of angst, disempowerment and vulnerability, emanating from their awareness of the state-directed dispossession they had experienced. The MBREMP's gendered impact was evident as women frequently blamed the park rangers for making their lives difficult through unreasonable and coercive restrictive practices. The paper argues that to achieve the laudable global goals of marine biodiversity conservation, it is imperative that the social complexities of the local context, livelihood concerns, gender relations, social hierarchies and the diverse perspectives of residents are ethnographically documented and integrated into policies leading to the practice of good governance of MPAs.

1. Introduction

The last few years have seen a groundswell of enthusiasm and urgency among advocates of marine biodiversity conservation to significantly scale up the number and size of marine protected areas [1,2]. This upsurge of renewed enthusiasm is prompted by the large-scale damage of coral reefs, degradation of marine habitat, loss of marine biodiversity, the collapse of many global fisheries [3–5] and "a sense of impending apocalypse" [6,7]. The benefits derived from establishing networks of marine protected areas (MPAs) for marine life and for human populations, have been commonly framed in the optimistic, rhetorically powerful language of "win-win" [8,9]. These benefits consist of increased local biodiversity, improved fisheries, establishment of alternative livelihoods for coastal populations, sustainable resource utilization, poverty reduction through eco-tourism, and ultimately community empowerment and well-being [10]. Consequently, "the proposition that MPAs both *can* and *should* lead to win-win outcomes for conservation and development…is becoming the dominant paradigm" [11]. This is not to suggest that those who support the scale-up of conventional MPAs around the world are unaware of the

difficulties involved in realizing the objectives of biodiversity conservation, nor that they are incognizant of the possibility of "win-win" scenarios becoming unpleasant, physically violent situations. Yet, the enthusiasm for MPAs as the mainstream tool in marine biodiversity conservation and fisheries management overrides these concerns [1,3,12].

While some studies have demonstrated how MPAs can be used as useful management tools in maintaining marine biodiversity, and supporting the well-being of coastal populations [13,14] others have provided empirical evidence to reveal the substantial challenges and difficulties in successfully implementing MPAs in different parts of the world [15–18]. There have been repeated calls to pay as much attention to the social impacts of MPAs as given to the biological impacts to actualize the "win-win" scenario [19–24], and to make the goal of 10% aerial coverage by 2020 an achievable reality. Few studies that have systematically documented the negative effects of MPAs on local communities, have highlighted the nature and magnitude of opposition to MPAs among fishers and marine resources users from coastal communities in different parts of the world. These studies have shed light on the socioeconomic dynamics that have led to tensions, hostility and

violent confrontations between those representing the MPAs, and those who believe that their livelihoods are negatively affected by the conservation efforts [5,18,22,25–33]. Poor planning, overambitious goals, top-down governance structures and management styles, lack of engagement with local populations, physical displacement and forced relocation of local populations, violent approaches to enforcement/infringements of regulations, lack of trust and poor communication are identified as among the many reasons why MPAs do not represent "win-win" scenarios [34].

Drawing on an ethnographic study of dispossession and the micropolitics of marine conservation in southeastern Tanzania, this paper examines the local dynamics pertaining to the Mnazi Bay-Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park (MBREMP) in rural Mtwara on Tanzania's border with Mozambique. By analyzing the narratives of people living in the MBREMP's catchment area, regarding their lived experiences with the MBREMP, it seeks to highlight inter-village and intra-village similarities and differences in the perceived significance and social impact of the marine park. The paper seeks to shed light on the "social diversity within the community" or alternatively, "internal differentiation" as it relates to marine conservation [35]. It aims to contribute to the recent literature on factors associated with the success and failures of MPAs as key instruments in marine biodiversity conservation. The paper provides context-specific ethnographic insights into why some residents of fishing villages in coastal Tanzania support marine parks, while others oppose them. In the sections that follow, some key concepts and propositions that are central to this paper are presented followed by a description of the research setting and the methodology used to gather and analyze the data. The middle section hones in on the empirical data, which are mostly narrative segments from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). This is followed by a discussion of the key concerns emanating from the data analysis, and a conclusion in which the empirical and policy-related significance of the study findings are highlighted. The paper's overall proposition underscores the need to pay more attention to the local-level human dimensions and social complexities within coastal communities. While these are widely acknowledged and deemed integral to the recent call for the scaling-up of MPAs around the globe [1,12,14], such discourse demands moving beyond the rhetoric of community engagement. To achieve the laudable global goals of marine biodiversity conservation, it is imperative that the social complexities of the local context, livelihood concerns, gender relations, social hierarchies and the diverse perspectives of residents are ethnographically documented, analyzed, and emergent insights incorporated into revised policies and guidelines leading to the practice of good governance of MPAs.

2. The essence of opposition to MPAs

Local communities have often opposed MPAs in the East African context where there has been historical conflict between local social norms of marine use governance and government-backed national-level management systems [18,35,36]. Walley's [33] ethnographic study of the early years of the Mafia Island Marine Park (MIMP) in Tanzania revealed that the local residents' overall response to the MIMP was marked by antagonism. More recently, Moshy, Bryceson and Mwaipopo [32] found that people appreciated the benefits of conservation in the MIMP in principle, especially a reduction in dynamite fishing, but condemned the non-inclusive manner in which the MIMP was implemented. Similarly, during the MBREMP's initial phase, residents of some villages threatened to use physical violence against the park officials and NGO representatives and in effect undermined the park's viability [30,37,38].

In addition to the many context-specific reasons, there are several other reasons that contribute to tensions and sometimes violent opposition to MPAs in different parts of the world. These include (a) affected communities' anger at being left out of the MPA planning process, (b) the lack of adequate compensation for loss of access to fishing grounds,

marine resources and livelihoods in general, (c) not respecting or valuing local traditional or practical knowledge, (d) government corruption, (e) incompetence and lack of accountability leading communities to feel betrayed by those at the helm of the MPA, and (f) an overall sense of injustice meted out to those whose livelihoods and cultural identities depend on the ocean, all leading to "frustration, stress, feelings of persecution, anger and betrayal" (5) among opponents. As Christie et al. [13] have demonstrated, "conflict and controversy are a predictable part of MPA design and implementation… [and] conflict is associated with the generation and equitable distribution of benefits derived from an MPA."

3. Methodology

The MBREMP was gazetted in 2000 with an area of approximately 650 km^2 of which some 430 km^2 is sea and 220 km^2 is land. It covers 45 km of coast, including coral reefs, sand dunes, mangroves, wetlands, coastal lagoons, three main islands, the Ruvuma River estuary, and 17 villages with a total population of around 44,000 [39,40]. The park's general management plan includes the ideal of "collaborative management through community participation" as one of its key highlights. Activities prohibited inside the MBREMP include dynamite fishing, use of beach seine nets, monofilament nets, mangrove cutting for commercial sale, mining of live coral, and poaching of turtles or turtle eggs.

Most of the people who live in the region self-identify as Makonde – the dominant and largest ethnic group in the Mtwara region. They speak KiMakonde and KiSwahili. The majority of the coastal villagers are poor, economically, socially and educationally disadvantaged, and heavily dependent on subsistence farming and marine-related and coastal activities, especially subsistence fishing [27,40]. The data presented in this paper were gathered in four sea-bordering villages – Msimbati, Mtandi, Nalingu and Mkubiru – inside the MBREMP's catchment area over a period of five months – from August 2014 to December 2014. At the time of data collection, most villagers in the study villages were living in thatched mud houses. While two of the four study villages had wired electricity, most households in these villages could not afford to pay for installation and recurring costs. Many households in all four villages had invested in solar panels.

A total of 160 individuals were selected through a purposive sampling approach until the sample quota was achieved – 20 women and 20 men in each of the four villages – and interviewed with the help of a male and a female research assistant. Additionally, eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted – 4 women's groups and 4 men's groups – with 6 participants in each of the FGDs. A brief life history of each participant was obtained through the interview, which lasted between 45 and 75 min. Participants were interviewed on topics such as, what life was like 10–15 years ago compared to the present, and their opinions regarding quality of life, food security, outmigration risks and benefits, marine park risks and benefits, and their thoughts on how livelihoods could be improved locally. FGDs lasted between an hour and 90 min and discussed participants' disposition toward the marine park and food security-related concerns. All interviews and FGDs were recorded using a digital audio-recorder and transcribed verbatim. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all the study participants and the consent was audio-recorded before proceeding with the interviews and FGDs. The transcribed interviews and FGDs resulted in hundreds of pages of narratives and text data/transcripts written in Kiswahili, which were reviewed independently by the author and two research assistants for main themes and ideas. Key themes included dynamite fishing, dispossession, displacement, restrictions, injustice, food security, participation, violence, and suffering. Relevant quotes were identified in the transcribed text and translated into English.

4. Marine conservation and good intentions

In the study villages, a small number of people forcefully argued in