

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Conservation Policy and the Commons, by Moira Moeliono

Fishermen at the Frontline of Marine Conservation

Patricia Pinto da Silva

Social Scientist, NOAA Fisheries, Northeast Fisheries Science Center, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, USA

Moira Moeliono's commentary questions who benefits from protected areas and what the role of resource users should be in these initiatives. Certainly, where no clear link exists between the quality of the resource and the wellbeing (economic or otherwise) of the dependent communities or resource users, garnering local support and participation for such initiatives will be challenging.

However, where these links exist and where stakeholders wish to participate in the governance of these resources, they should be encouraged and enabled to do so. Although protected areas have historically been the keystone of terrestrial conservation programs, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have taken longer to gain currency. As a result, experiences with stakeholder participation in marine conservation and management are also comparatively new. Striking the right balance of rights and responsibilities between resource users and governments in the management of these areas is not always straightforward and arrangements appropriate for one situation may not work in another. Where protected areas are created primarily to achieve conservation objectives, garnering local level support and participation is often difficult. However, protected areas and non-placed based resource management regimes can also emerge at the bequest of the resource users themselves. Such collaborative management arrangements are likely to be more socially sustainable when they are not imposed from the outside.

Although MPAs (like their terrestrial counterparts) come in a variety of forms, they are often (mis) interpreted as 'closed areas,' especially when these are introduced by resource management entities to severely limit or completely restrict extractive activities. However, few areas off the northeastern coast of the US are closed to all fishing activities, although most fisheries management plans (particularly in New England) involve some type of place-based management. The result is that fishing grounds in the region are layered with restricted-use areas that, when mapped, appear to be an odd sort of patchwork quilt.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act of 1976 established regional fishery management councils consisting of governmental and appointed industry representatives. Although the Act decentralized conservation and management decisions to the regional level, opportunities for community-based or user group management were not formally established in the Northeast region. Nonetheless, over the years, a number of resource user groups have strived for the opportunity to manage an allocation of the resource (such as a percentage of a stocks total allowable catch or a geographic area). Presently, the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association co-manages a portion of the Georges Bank cod quota (under the New England Northeast Multispecies Management Plan) as a community based group. The Montauk Tilefish Association has a similar arrangement for a significant fraction of the tilefish quota (under the Mid-Atlantic Tilefish Fishery Management Plan).

In Brazil, 'bottom-up' opportunities for decentralized marine conservation have also emerged. Since the 1990s, MPAs in Brazil have been based largely on a participatory conservation model. Maritime Extractive Reserves (MERs), a type of government-community collaborative management regime, have

been established in coastal areas at the request of local resource user communities to protect natural resources while sustaining local livelihoods. Coastal communities interested in establishing an MER develop a proposal and, if this is approved, play an active role in the conservation and management of the MER. In return, the government provides the community with extractive rights over the MER for a limited period of time (*i.e.*, 60 years). The long-term participation of resource users in this arrangement is the cornerstone of this conservation and development model. This approach is based on the idea that where resource users see a direct link between the status/condition of a resource and their own livelihoods, conservation objectives are more likely to be achieved over the long term. As of 2005, 18 MERs have been created in Brazil and more are planned.

In the USA Atlantic and Brazilian cases, interest in participation in the management process exists. Motivating factors include external resource threats and the desire for greater control over decisions affecting community livelihoods. Rights come with stewardship responsibilities and the success of these initiatives is dependent on ability of the groups to sustain their management regimens over time. Certain group and resource characteristics seem to lend themselves better to collaborative management. In the Northeast USA, for example, co-management success has been associated with groups that are place-based, small in size, and whose decisions clearly control conservation outcomes.

Moeliono rightly states that governments are unable to manage resources on their own. The same is true, however, for communities and resource users. Decentralized governance does not mean that harvesters bear the entire burden of responsibility but – where interest and capacity exist - they have the opportunity to do so. Moeliono also points to the need to address problems at appropriate geographic and institutional levels. Fishing pressure is only one of many activities that determine the overall health of marine ecosystems, and certainly cannot be managed in isolation. Moving towards ecosystem based management (EBM) should lead to management structures that recognize the many vital linkages between land and marine activities (*e.g.*, fishing, shipping, mining, etc.) and which ensure that decisions are made at the appropriate scale. Fisheries management, at any scale, will not be successful if such factors are ignored or discounted.

In developed countries economic and commercial concerns are often central drivers in determining how and for whom fisheries resources are managed, while developing countries are often faced with simply meeting basic needs. In both situations, however, fishermen and fishing communities are at the frontline of conservation and must be engaged in the process. Moira Moeliono notes that conservation is a social challenge. The question is not whether resource users should participate in resource management - but how to design appropriate local and regional institutions to foster such input and to ensure the right balance of rights and responsibilities. This is easier said than done.