

For a better tomorrow

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Women in the Philippines are taking a stand against destructive and unsustainable fishing. On the small island of Siquijor, they have begun to play an important role in the management of a few community-based marine protected areas (MPAs). Aided by the technical support of their local government and the NGO Coastal Conservation and Education Foundation, some women have been empowered to manage marine sanctuaries to the benefit of the entire community.

MPAs are a key global tool of marine conservation, and stakeholder participation is a well-acknowledged critical component of their success. Although over 1,000 MPAs now exist in the Philippines, only 20 to 30 per cent of them are effectively managed. In their intent to create collaborative management of MPAs, NGOs and government agencies have historically focused on fishermen as the primary stakeholders.

Fishermen are sometimes already members of an established Fisherfolk Organization (FO), and when the process of creating an MPA begins, the FO is pulled in to jointly manage the MPA alongside the local government. Women who glean or collect shells and urchins have traditionally not been considered “fishers” and, therefore, FOs are mostly or entirely male-dominated. As women have been systematically excluded from the opportunity to participate in MPA management, most management teams have few or no women involved. Instead, the FO and the local government put in the time and effort to manage the MPA but also receive the monetary benefits that come from divers’ user fees.

Several case studies point to the positive role of women in MPA management; however, open-water MPAs are not covered by the literature. This article explores the role and effectiveness of women’s participation in open-water MPA management in the Philippines.

There are two cases in Siquijor where the local women have taken the initiative to participate in MPAs. In one location, Maite, 28 women created their own registered association. Pushed and

encouraged by a local retiree, the women were the main drivers of the MPA. They collaborated with their town council and FO (in which many of their husbands were members) to establish an MPA in their local waters in 2009. In the second location, Bino-ongan, 11 women who are not members of an association or the local FO volunteered their time to assist their town council in the establishment and maintenance of an MPA. In Bino-ongan, the women reported that the local fishermen and the FO were not even interested in establishing and managing the MPA. The women have successfully assisted the town council in performing baseline ecological surveys and delineating the boundaries of the MPA with homemade buoy lines of plastic bottles.

In Maite, the women involved in the MPA are mostly non-gleaners, and range in age from 23 to 73; they primarily manage their households and run a variety of small businesses. Though burdened by many hours of unpaid domestic responsibilities, the women participate in all aspects of MPA management. They take turns guarding the MPA day and night, reprimand violators, clean up the beach, maintain the guardhouse and buoy lines, collect crown-of-thorns sea stars, and monitor the condition of the reef by snorkelling. In comparison with a study site run by only fishermen, the women in Maite seem to have maintained better records, run a tighter budget, and displayed greater enthusiasm in sharing information with community members.

Though non-fishers, the women in both study sites were found to have an acute awareness of the state of local fisheries. Women acknowledged that the poor state of fisheries and uncertainty over their children’s ability to catch fish and earn a decent livelihood in future are some of the primary reasons for their participation in the MPA. Some declared it was their duty as citizens to protect their local coral reef from destructive fishing methods. In the words of a woman from Maite: “We are the *barangay* (pioneers) who started this sanctuary. We have to preserve our sanctuary, our resources, the corals

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and the fish because we have so much illegal fishing in our area. So we have to make a guardhouse and a schedule of duty to fight illegal fishing. We have to protect our sanctuary for the future of our children. Maybe someday we will have many fish.”

In contrast, the few fishermen in MPA management in Maite stated that they participated because they hoped to gain extra income not only from increased fish stocks but also from government projects external to the MPA, like tree planting and seaweed farming.

Though small, the Maite MPA is a popular diving site among local tourist operators and has brought USD 6,000 into the community from collections of divers’ fees over the past three years. Only 15 per cent of the profit is divided among all 50 members of the management team, giving each member an average of USD 6 per year. This cash benefit is too small in Maite to be considered a primary incentive. However, today, the increased catch size, which many community members attribute to the MPA, is seen as benefiting the whole community.

The local government staff reports other benefits of including women in coastal resource management, such as better understanding among community members and a significant decrease in conflict. In livelihood projects, women reportedly take greater initiative, delegate tasks, take care of details, and agree to put in the most labour, leading to improved project outcomes.

There are many reasons women should be included in the process of establishing and managing protected areas. Small MPAs often include the intertidal zone, so gleaners — mostly women — who collect shells and urchins at low tide are the primary resource users and, therefore, a critical stakeholder group. They not only have special knowledge of the intertidal zone that can be used for more effective management, but gleaning is also a primary local source of food — the fish caught by men is often sold but the marine invertebrates gathered by gleaners are often consumed at the dinner table.

Further, when an MPA is established, fishermen are often able to deal with the new restrictions it imposes by putting out their boats further from the coast; gleaners, however, have limited alternate fishing grounds. Clearly, gleaners and fisherwomen are the most marginalised by MPAs and should, therefore, be considered primary stakeholders. According to MPA researchers, including women in natural resource management “increases collaboration, solidarity and conflict resolution”. Conflicts over natural resources are common in the Philippines, where artisanal fishers battle daily against commercial boats and depleted fish stocks. To improve marine conservation as well as to empower women and promote gender equality, women must be systematically included in the management of MPAs.