Ecotourism and Protected Areas: Governance, Empowerment, Community

TTRA Extended Abstract

Ecotourism and Protected Areas: Governance, Empowerment, Community

Graduate Research in Bocas del Toro, Panama

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Entrance to the Salt Creek Community, where most of the research took place

Abstract

Protected areas (PAs) are globally recognized as key socio-political strategies for sustainable tourism development and conservation biodiversity. Given their importance, various international institutions call for the increased protection of 30% of land and sea by 2030 through protected areas. Protected area systems, however, are not a panacea for solving global biodiversity degradation. PAs have been tied to negative outcomes for resource dependent communities living near these areas such as land dispossession and access restriction. This complicated issue results in PA management becoming a 'wicked problem' . During October, 2021, I conducted qualitative field research in the Bastimentos Island National Marine Park (BINMP) located in the touristic destination of Bocas del Toro (BDT), Panama. The Panamanian economy (and especially BDT) relies heavily on ecotourism and nature-based tourism. The Panamanian government aims to have 30% of their marine areas and coasts protected by 2030. This could potentially include the expansion of the BINMP, one of the most important attractions of the country and considered a prime example of ecotourism. By conducting research in Salt Creek, a specific community found in the surrounding are of the BINMP, the purpose of this study is to understand how policy decisions, and communication between different actors over time changes governance structures of PAs, and how global institutions influence the decisions taken by a country, which in turn impacts local livelihoods. By incorporating a multi-dimensional empowerment framework, we aim to examine communities' and government officials' perceptions toward Protected Areas and their potential expansion. In this conference I will present my methodology and preliminary results from the field. Through my participation in this conference, I seek feedback and advice from fellow qualitative- focused colleagues.

Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) are globally recognized as key socio-political strategies for sustainable tourism development and the conservation of biodiversity (Boley & Green, 2015; Locke & Dearden, 2005; Mach et al., 2020; Saviano et al., 2018). They are a core piece of sustainable tourism development as they simultaneously satisfy tourists demands for nature-based experiences and protect biodiverse ecosystems while providing socio-economic benefits to stakeholders living in surrounding areas (Eagles et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2013; Nyaupane, 2020). Given their importance, international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) call for the increased protection of 30% of land and sea by 2030 through protected areas or other area-based conservation methods (CBD, 2020; Paredes, 2019; Rife et al., 2012). This includes expanding the protection of ocean, seas, and coastal zones.

While an important strategy for conservation, protected area systems are not a panacea for solving global biodiversity degradation (Krüger, 2005). Protected areas have been tied to negative outcomes for resource dependent communities living near these areas such as land dispossession and access restriction (Brechin et al., 2002; Dawson et al., 2017; Lockwood, 2009). This complicated issue results in PA management becoming a 'wicked problem' that has compelled debate among academics within the conservation literature for more than 40 years (DeFries & Nagendra, 2017; Fletcher, 1990; Harrison et al., 1982; Morea, 2021; Shultis & Heffner, 2016; Wells & McShane, 2004).

My master's thesis research consists of a case study conducted in the Indigenous Ngobe community of Salt Creek, in the archipelago of Bocas del Toro, Panama, a crucial touristic destination of the country, and where the Bastimentos Island National Marine Park (BINMP) is located.

The Panamanian economy (and especially BDT) relies heavily on ecotourism and nature-based tourism (Guerron- Montero, 2005; Mach et al., 2020). Their protected area systems are linked to their ecotourism strategies, and they take international PA expansion targets seriously (Rodriguez, 2021). The Panamanian government aims to have 30% of their marine areas and coasts protected by 2030, in line with international expansion targets (Travel2LATAM, 2020). This could potentially include the expansion of the BINMP, one of the most important attractions of the country and a considered a prime example of ecotourism.

The purpose of this study is to incorporate a multi-dimensional empowerment framework to examine communities' and government officials' perceptions Protected Areas (PAs) and their potential expansion. With this purpose in mind, I seek to answer these specific research questions as they relate to the specific context of Salt Creek and Bocas del Toro: 1) What attitudes and perceptions do communities surrounding BNMIP have towards past and current park management? 2) What knowledge do communities have about global expansion targets and proposals to expand the BINMP? 3) What can be learned from past decisions regarding park management that would make park expansion more equitable going forward?

Using the Multi-dimensional empowerment framework as a guide, these questions are centered on centered on people's perceptions and accounts of the historical-social impacts of the PA being established, and people's opinions on the government's plans to expand, as they relate to PA governance structures. As the government of Panama publicly moves towards a polycentric governance model, and towards achieving international PA expansion targets - how have communication and dynamics changed between communities and the government?

Study Site

Salt Creek was selected as the study site was selected for a few reasons: 1) I have previous research experience in this area. I conducted research at this PA while I was an undergraduate student in Bocas del Toro (BDT). The study from my previous research experience was accepted to publication in a 2020 issue of *Tourism Management* and presented at the National Environment and Recreation Research Symposium in April (2019). Additionally, my colleagues and I were contacted by the Ministry of the Environment (MiAmbiente) of Panama, requesting a whitepaper of the study for it to be considered when making decisions regarding the MPA's budget. 2) From my previous time in the area, I count with contacts and connections that helped me successfully conduct a study. 3) The Panamanian government is constantly changing the BINMP's management policies. Most recently they had plans for expanding the park to double its size, a proposal which local communities rejected. This project is focused on this (potential) expansion plan- which has been halted, but not entirely cancelled by the government- and communities' feelings towards it. 4) The thoughts and perceptions of the people of Salt Creek about BNMIP have not been explored before, this is the first-time social research will be conducted in this specific area.

Methodology

To answer the listed research questions, I spent three weeks in Bocas del Toro, Panama during the month of October.

I spent one week in Bocas Town, interviewing government officials and non-governmental organizations. The questions centered the current management of the BINMP, plans for the park (such as expansion), and the government's relationship with communities surrounding the BINMP. I spoke with 3 different governmental organizations, and 4 people from

different non-governmental organizations involved with the BINMP. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour and were audio recorded.

I spent two weeks in Salt Creek interviewing members of the Salt Creek Indigenous Ngobe community. Questions centered the relationship that the community has with the PA as well as their opinions on plans of expansion. I spoke with 30 members of the community: some encounters were individual interviews or conversations, while others were focus groups led by key informants of the group. I interviewed both women and men from a range of different ages (20-70), who either were involved in tourism or were not. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour and were audio recorded.

I am currently in the transcription and translation process, and plan to analyze my data deductively using a multi-dimensional empowerment framework while also noting emerging data. I believe that the emerging data will be crucial for my results and study. For analyzing my data, I will be using Atlas.TI.

Preliminary Results

The Panamanian government has notoriously pushed for Marine PA expansion as a sustainable development strategy. In May 2021, the Ministry of the Environment approached communities surrounding the BINMP to ask if they supported expansion, as well as what benefits and changes they would like to see in the park's management. This was one of the first times in the history of the park that the government directly entered communities and asked about their concerns. Members of Salt Creek did not answer many of the survey questions that the government asked. When I asked why they declined to respond, the main response was that they did not have enough knowledge about the management of the park, they rejected the idea of

more land taken away from them, and they either remember, or have been told by older people, about the struggles faced by the Ngobe people when the park was first created.

From my conversations with people, both from the government and the community, it is evident that the relationship between these two actors is damaged. The government is aware of this and knows that a difficult path towards reconciliation lies ahead before any expansion can happen at BNMIP.

From my field notes, I note there is a lack of dialogue between the government and the community. There are promises and projects from the government that never came. There is fear of more resource restrictions while they notice how others profit from exploiting the land from tourism. There is eagerness to be involved and included in tourism planning and the benefits that tourism brings.

Next Steps

My master's thesis research project is focused on this case study. I am currently transcribing and analyzing the data and getting ready for my thesis defense coming in April. I hope to present my results and discussion in this conference and share my methodology in more detail during the TTRA conference. I also hope that my colleague qualitative researchers in the field of tourism provide feedback in terms of the methodology, as this is the first project that I have designed by myself throughout this master's program (with the help of my advisor, Bynum Boley and my thesis committee).

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