

When the Cradle Falls: A Case of Management Failure in a Community Marine Reserve in Southern Philippines

Asuncion Biña-de Guzman
Mindanao State University at Naawan
9023 Naawan, Misamis Oriental, Philippines
E-mail Address: sony_deguzman@yahoo.com

The Baliangao Marine Sanctuary (BMS) in Danao Bay in Southern Philippines is an example of upscaling an NGO-driven, community-managed marine protected area (MPA) into a National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) site. The BMS is a 74-ha marine reserve complex composed of a shallow lagoon core area, extensive reef flats, and a narrow fore reef zone. The BMS was established in 1991 by the Pipuli Foundation which organized the Danao Bay Resource Management Organization (DB-REMO), a federation of people's organizations around the bay. In preparation for its exit the Pipuli Foundation empowered the DB-REMO to implement a community-based coastal resource management program around the MPA and the entire Danao Bay from 1998 to 2002 with only nominal support from the local government. The BMS was declared a NIPAS site in November 2000 and a Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) organized in 2002 took over its management. The abrupt change in institutional arrangements, perception of "losing ownership" of the project, and lack of representation to the PAMB had discouraged community stakeholders from active participation in the sanctuary management. Weakened law enforcement from lack of community participation gave way to massive fishing violations inside the MPA in early 2005.

Underwater assessment in August 2005 showed a reduction in hard coral cover, fish species diversity, and fish biomass from their 2001 levels. Average hard coral cover declined from 46.8% in 2001 to 31.2% in 2005. Fish diversity was reduced (by 30%) from 135 species to 94 species inside the sanctuary core area, while that in the reef slope had been reduced by as much as 70% from 93 to 23 species in 2005. Overall fish abundance inside the sanctuary core declined by 54%, while the population of target food fish in the reef slopes of the MPA drastically declined by almost 80%. The most convincing proof of degradation in fish communities was the significant reduction in biomass of the target food fish from 35.86 kg 1000m⁻² to 7.14 kg 1000m⁻² inside the core area, and from 3.12 kg 1000m⁻² to 0.06 kg 1000m⁻².

The sad consequences of events leading to this management failure awakened the PAMB and the municipal government of Baliangao to strengthen efforts on law enforcement around the MPA.



The DB-REMO has become active again in guarding the sanctuary. Recent assessments in December 2006 and January 2008 showed that both hard coral cover and overall fish standing stock inside the MPA have improved since 2005, however, this development is still precarious and the MPA management has to remain militant in order to prevent future collapse in management.

These ecological impacts of management failure imply that upscaling a community-managed MPA to a NIPAS site does not always result in improved management and environmental governance. Many of the sites placed under NIPAS are small community reserves that are being effectively managed by people's organizations with support from NGOs and the local government. An evaluation of the NIPAS policy on MPAs in the Philippines is highly recommended.