

Parks and People: Perceptions of Different Stakeholders to Changing MPA Regulations in the Tsitsikamma National Park

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Awarded an honorable mention at the IMBeR (Integrated Marine Biosphere Research) Future Oceans 2 conference in Brest, France in June 2019 and second for best oral presentation at the WIOMSA (Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association) 11th scientific symposium in Mauritius in July 2019.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) can be crucial for sustainable marine governance. However, they are only effective if designed to consider how people interact with the coasts and seas designated for protection. In South Africa, MPAs created prior to 1994 under the Apartheid regime largely disregarded marginalized communities' rights to the coast and removed access entirely, with no consultation. However, in December 2016, the Tsitsikamma National Park MPA was rezoned from a 'no-take' to a partially open protected area with the aim of re-addressing these historical injustices and to provide equitable access and benefits to adjacent communities. However, past marginalization has changed how communities interact and access the coast, and limited consultation has increased the tension between the regulating authority and the community. There has also been a subsequent national outcry from the public, conservation non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, fisheries scientists and marine biologists who view the re-zoning as politically motivated, and detrimental towards marine conservation objectives. This research therefore critically examines the different perceptions of stakeholders towards the rezoning of Africa's oldest marine protected area, the Tsitsikamma National Park MPA. To do so, it draws on 56 semi-structured key informant interviews from different groups, namely, the nine different communities adjacent to the Tsitsikamma MPA, scientists, NGO and government officials, as well as a focus group with eight representatives from South African National Parks. The research highlights the challenge of balancing community needs with conservation goals in a rapidly changing marine context, the opposition and inequity emerging to undermine opportunities for sustainable outcomes (social and ecological), and the need for governance of MPAs in South Africa that is reflective of the human rights that must underpin efforts to achieve biological goals.