

Comment

Parking in the right place

The Vth World Parks Congress, held at Durban, South Africa from 8 to 17 September 2003, has called upon the international community to establish by 2012 "a global system of effectively managed, representative networks of marine and coastal protected areas" that includes within its scope the world's oceans and seas beyond national jurisdiction as well.

An important objective of the Congress' recommendations (see page 27) is to integrate marine protected areas (MPAs) with other ocean, coastal and land-governance policies to achieve sustainable fisheries, biodiversity conservation, species protection and integrated watershed, coastal, ocean, high-seas and polar management.

The Congress has proposed an increase in the marine and coastal area under MPAs, and further expects 20 to 30 per cent of each marine coastal habitat to be under "strictly protected reserves" to safeguard diverse marine habitats and ecosystem structures, biodiversity conservation, species protection and recovery of endangered species. It also highlights the importance of implementing an ecosystem-based approach to sustainable fisheries management and marine biodiversity conservation.

The Congress calls upon the world community to engage stakeholders, including local and traditional communities, in the design, planning and management, and sharing of benefits, of MPAs. It also recommends sustainable socioeconomic returns to local and traditional communities and industry, subject to the precautionary approach, which places the burden of proof for the marine environment not being harmed on those who commercially benefit from MPA resources.

We welcome the World Parks Congress' recommendations and hope national and provincial governments will establish MPAs in consultation with local communities and other stakeholders, and that they will refrain from current practices, especially in several Asian countries like the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and India, to establish MPAs by keeping out all fishers, including artisanal and small-scale fishers who use environmentally sustainable fishing gear and practices. Even in "strictly protected areas", we would argue for permitting artisanal and community-based fisheries to operate, as long as their fisheries are not a threat to the health of the marine ecosystem, as determined by science-based observations. We would further argue that an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management should consider fishers as part of the ecosystem, and not as outsiders.

The most difficult challenge to establishing inclusive MPAs, however, would be the conflicting jurisdiction between the environment and fisheries agencies at the government level in most developing countries. In several Asian countries, the environment ministries are responsible for setting up MPAs. Unfortunately, they are notorious for their draconian, species-based protectionist approach and for a colonial perspective that views nature as a preserve to be protected from the human species. The responsibility to set up MPAs should ideally be taken away from the environment ministries and transferred to the fisheries departments, and it is high time that fisheries departments give greater emphasis to sustainable fisheries and healthy coastal, marine ecosystems.

A consultative, ecosystem-based approach, adopting precautionary principles to industrial and other forms of destructive fisheries and land-based sources of pollution, could be an effective management tool for sustaining fisheries and livelihoods. While setting priorities under an ambitious list of actions proposed by the World Parks Congress, national governments should attach the greatest priority to areas of immediate concern to coastal artisanal and small-scale fishing communities.

