

Asia/ India

Restricting Lives and Livelihoods

The recent enforcement of 'no take' regulations in the Gulf of Mannar National Park compromises the livelihood security of fisherwomen and local communities

By Ramya Rajagopalan, currently researching marine protected areas for a Master of Marine Affairs degree at the University of Rhode Island, USA

The Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park and Biosphere Reserve, located in the state of Tamil Nadu in south India, consists of a group of 21 islands. The government of Tamil Nadu declared the area as a marine national park in 1986, under the Wildlife (Protection) Act (WLPA), 1972. The total area under the Gulf of Mannar National Park (GOMNP) is 560 sq km. The WLPA does not allow any kind of extractive use inside the national park, thus effectively making it a 'no take' zone. The biosphere reserve, notified later in 1989, covers a larger area of 10,500 sq km and includes the GOMNP as the core zone.

The GOMNP is spread across two administrative districts of Tamil Nadu, Ramanathapuram and Tuticorin, with a coastal length of 304.5km. The fisher population is estimated at over 200,000. There are 35,000 active fishermen and 10,000 fisherwomen dependent on the resources in the Gulf of Mannar area, including on fisheries and the collection of seaweed and other marine resources. Women are actively involved in fishing-related activities such as collecting seaweeds and shells, shore seine operations and harvesting crab. Women also undertake allied activities such as marketing and processing fish, drying seaweed, repairing nets and working as casual labour.

As many as 5,000 fisherwomen depend on seaweed collection in and around the 21 islands. Besides this, the women of two fishing villages—Chinnapalayam and Thoopukadu—accompany their husbands to the fishing grounds, sometimes fishing on their own. According to the Marine Fisheries Census conducted by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute in



2005, around 5,000 women depend on various other fishing-related activities in these areas.

The fishing communities of Chinnapalayam, Thoopukadu and Naduthuru in the Pamban area of Gulf of Mannar consist of traditional small-scale fishers. They use plank-built canoes (*vathais* and *vallams*) with rows and sails for propulsion, fishing in the waters around the nearby islands of Nallathanni, Krusadai, Palli, Mannali, Mulli, Musal/Muyal and Ulli for their livelihoods. They use different kinds of fishing gear such as crab net, *singhi valai*, *sembara valai*, *meen valai*, *koi valai*, *veral valai*, and *oda valai* (bottom set gillnets, gillnets made of nylon thread and monofilament gillnets) to catch mullets, milk fish, silver biddies and crabs. The *vathais*, with four or five people in each fishing craft, are used to reach the fishing grounds adjacent to the islands—the only grounds close enough to be accessible using non-motorized fishing craft.

Women play a very significant and unique role in these fishing communities. The women of Chinnapalayam and Thoopukadu, belonging to the *Valaiyar* community, have traditionally harvested crabs, fish and seaweeds in the waters around the islands facing the bay, and also, on the seaward side. These fishing grounds now fall under the GOMNP.

During the 1980s and 90s, people from these communities used to go to the islands, set their nets overnight, and return to the village the following

morning. Until recently, women could fish near the islands without any problem, even though the area was declared a protected area way back in 1986. The recent enforcement of regulations, however, prohibits women from fishing in these traditional fishing grounds. According to the community, forest guards often confiscate their nets and catch, and large sums may have to be paid in bribe to retrieve the nets. Such incidents have been occurring more frequently in the last four years.

Until 2002, the enforcement of regulations was weak due to lack of resources as well as poor co-ordination between the forest and the fisheries departments. The regulations have been more strictly enforced since 2002, when the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve Trust (GOMBRT) was set up and the United Nations Development Programme and Global Environment Facility (UNDP-GEF) project established, with financial outlays for enforcement and implementation.

As a result, women can no longer fish regularly in these areas. Seaweed collection would fetch the women Rs 100-150 per day and fishing, Rs 50-100 per day, depending on the species caught. The current enforcement of regulation has curtailed access to traditional fishing grounds with severe implications for livelihood security. Moreover, efforts to provide alternative livelihood to these women have not been effective. As part of the Ramnad Fishermen Union, a district level fishworker union, these fisherwomen are now demanding a partial lifting of restrictions in the park area. They argue that their non-motorized fishing craft and gillnets are significantly less harmful than the trawlers operating on the other side of the Rameshwaram islands.

To counter the top-down conservation process, villagers of Chinnapalayam and Thoopukadu have come together to put in place their own system of regulations. These prohibit the collection of protected species, the destruction of coral reefs and coral collection, the cutting of mangroves for firewood, and staying on in the islands. Seaweed collection is allowed for only 12 days a month. The women from

Naduthuru have stopped collecting the species listed in Schedule I of the WLPA, following discussions between the community elders and the forest department officials. A guard from the community has been appointed by the villagers to implement these rules. These regulations are being strictly followed, especially as there are penalties for violations, including handing over the offender to forest guards.

Through their actions, the fishermen and women in these villages have demonstrated that they can take steps to manage and conserve natural resources effectively—resources critical for their livelihood. Clearly, if a management plan for this area is to be effective, it must incorporate such efforts by the men and women of the community—the worst affected by the declaration of the national park and biosphere reserve.

In this context, it is worth noting that the WLPA mandates a management plan for every protected area. However, there is no management plan in place for the GOMNP—only yearly plans of the Department of Forest and Environment related to infrastructure requirements. The UNDP-GEF project implemented in collaboration with GOMBRT, initiated a process for formulating the management plan in 2006. Community inputs to this plan were limited. The plan has, however, recently been finalized and is awaiting approval.

Can the management plan and its implementation help in correcting the top-down, non-consultative and non-participatory approach of the past, which has until now served only to alienate local communities and increase their socioeconomic vulnerability? Can the authorities work towards compiling accurate, gender-disaggregated, baseline socio-economic data, in order to track whether benefits from conservation actually percolate to fishing communities? Can these efforts meet the goals of both conservation and livelihood security? These are important questions for the future. Indeed, for the survival of the communities in this area and for effective biodiversity conservation, they are nothing short of critical.

*Ramya can be contacted at
ramya.rajagopalan@gmail.com*