

Community networking:

A tool for circumventing weak governance in southern Thailand

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Empowering coastal communities to be active and to support the conservation of coastal resources is an integral part of developing good coastal management. In Thailand, the constitution recognises the role communities play in natural resource management. However, while that recognition is embodied in the Constitution, it is not reflected in all of the regulations that currently govern coastal issues.

Although this gap in the regulations has been recognised by the Royal Thai Government and is being addressed in recent revisions of many regulations, the process of revision is long and unlikely to be translated to immediate implementation. Because of this, identification of pragmatic solutions to empower communities, in order that they benefit from the legal acknowledgement of their rights is needed urgently.

For good coastal management, knowledge, as well as the capacity to understand complex issues, are essential. In the case of communities, networking is a practical approach to enable learning, share knowledge and build capacity. Peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge,

mixed with hands-on learning and relationship-building are all useful mechanisms to bond communities within an ecosystem. This process fosters the sense of belonging not only to individual groups but also to larger groups that share a common idea and vision. This leads to positive benefits for landscape level planning.

In Southern Thailand IUCN had to work with sensitive ecosystems, in a context where the legal mechanisms to implement an ecosystem approach were fragmented and the governmental framework convoluted, confusing and with overlapping jurisdictions. In addition, there was little cross-sectoral action, therefore using a holistic approach was difficult. The existing complexities of the legislative and governance structures weaken the governance environment, resulting in impediments to centralised action.

It was against this backdrop of constraints, juxtaposed with solid existing partnerships, that the BMZ project team had to identify what could be achieved practically.

The team focused on communities.

ECOSYSTEMS AND LIVELIHOODS GROUP, ASIA

Using a participatory approach involving all stakeholders:

From the beginning, a participatory approach was used. The project emphasised Principle 12 of the Convention on Biodiversity that all relevant stakeholders of society and scientific disciplines should be involved in identifying and applying actions. Thus, IUCN engaged with government agencies, local authorities, and experts, in nine tambons in four districts, encompassing 32 villages, 1,800 households with a population of 6,500 people. Fifty seven meetings were held initially at national, provincial, district, sub district and at the community level, with a suite of stakeholders.

The project then focussed on working with eight Community Based Organisations (CBOs), comprising 35 villages and 110 persons.

To buttress the CBOs, the BMZ Thailand Team identified institutions and organisations already involved in conservation activities – such as the Phuket Marine Biological Centre – and actively engaged them in the project.

Strengthening capacity:

The Team developed a working relationship with stakeholders and used a process, which identified entry points and assessed community capacities to develop actions that supported their strengths, but did not force them into actions developed by outsiders. Training was provided in the form of technical backstopping, financial management, study tours, learning visits and the formation of management committees. In this process of capacity building, 80 people were trained in sea grass monitoring, 60 in soil and water conservation measures, 30 women were trained in baking, 30 in flower making and 34 stateless Thai women in Nypa thatching. A further 65 were trained in GPS-based mapping, and 193 people were involved in exchange visits and study tours.



Engaging youth:

Critically, for future conservation, the need to engage with youth at all sites was emphasised as part of the approach taken by the BMZ team. Youth groups across the watershed were engaged in monitoring their environment, with 240 school children and school leavers from seven villages being involved actively. Investing in youth groups was seen as an investment for the future, as the youth of today will be the ambassadors for conservation tomorrow. Initially, youth groups were given training in implementing simplified scientific assessment methodology for monitoring water quality and flow of their respective local rivers; monitoring the extent and quality of seagrass meadows; and rehabilitating a Water Lily species endemic to the region. Since the second year, they have been carrying out the monitoring by themselves and are capable of explaining to adults and visitors about the current state of the landscape and measures needed for conservation.



Scaling up: networking communities:

The physical area of implementation for the BMZ project in Thailand involved two catchments areas: the Ka Poe watershed in the north and the Kuraburi watershed in the south, with seven and five CBOs in each of these areas respectively.

Once the BMZ project mobilised and trained the CBOs, the Team arranged for study tours and peer learning, beginning the process of networking. Three study tours were conducted for 60 people across the landscape.

The Kuraburi Coastal Community networks 25 committee members from eight villages, while the Ka Poe Estuary networks 25 committee members from nine villages, and the Ka Poe River Group networks 60 people from 15 villages.

The Khao Mae Nang Khao Conservation Group networks 40 committee member people from eight villages. The Patrolling network (including Marine Police and community members) brings together 21 people from four 4 villages; while the Youth Network 55 youth committee members from five villages. The Eco-tourism Network brings together 15 people from eight villages. In total, 35 villages and approximately 110 people are networked.

In addition to networking within the ecosystem, local networks have also been able to engage with a number of regional networks, such as the Andaman Triangle Network. By enabling local communities to network with more established networks, they have gained knowledge and moved towards becoming part of a regional network that covers the Andaman Coast. Through such interactions, the community networks of the area have been able to access knowledge of monitoring and surveillance, to contribute to discussions on fishery regulations and to learn from their peers.

This networking ensures that CBOs are not working as isolated bodies but are sharing experiences and knowledge. In the process, the number of stakeholders increases.



Beyond networking: advocacy

Communities in the Kapoe and Kuraburi watershed are now actively protecting and conserving their own landscapes, engaged in surveying their own biodiversity, monitoring catches, mapping ecosystems and assessing threats. What is more important, local level empowerment with knowledge has resulted in a powerful advocacy tool that is being used from ridge to reef. These CBOs are now lobbying provincial councils with regard to human-induced threats that are damaging ecosystems, reaching agreements to halt forest encroachment and developing regulations, protecting over-used species and rehabilitating others.

This project has demonstrated clearly that despite a weak and convoluted governmental system and little influence at the regional level, actions are possible if the project design accommodates what is practically feasible and works within the existing system, buttressing and strengthening communities to protect the landscape.

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