

Towards a Sustainable Management and Enhanced Protection of Sacred Marine Areas at Palawan's Coron Island Ancestral Domain, Philippines

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Summary

The traditional fishing grounds of the Calamian Tagbanwa, an indigenous small-scale fishing community in Coron Island, Palawan are under increasing fishing pressure. The island was once host to a diverse and ecologically intact marine ecosystem. However, modern times have brought destruction to the coral reefs. In a move to stop the illegal and destructive fishing activities over their traditional fishing grounds, the Calamian Tagbanwa asserted their rights over their ancestral waters with the intention of reinstating their traditional fishing practices. Fish sanctuaries are restricted areas, while sacred marine areas are traditionally respected and avoided because of the spirit of a giant, human-like octopus believed to live there. Interviews and group discussions were used at the two villages of the island, Banwang

Daan and Cabugao to assess the current fishing practices.

Increasing numbers of Calamian Tagbanwa and immigrant fishers in the island are exposing the restricted and sacred areas to degradation. The fishing activities of the immigrants are affecting the Calamian Tagbanwa traditional fishing practices. In addition, the Council of Elders is faced with the challenge of strengthening the traditional enforcement responses to violations as well as with addressing the changing behaviour of the younger generations. Modernization and urbanization tend to influence the changing cultural and spiritual values among the youth. Sacred areas are invaluable to the Calamian Tagbanwa as these symbolize their culture. The formulation of the Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan involves Calamian Tagbanwa and other management constituents. The Calamian Tagbanwa considers this plan to be a welcome step to strengthen and enhance their capacity to

effectively manage their area and to intensify the protection on restricted and sacred areas within the ancestral domain. Information dissemination about their customary fishing practices should be prioritized especially within the island as well as environmental awareness activities among the younger generations. Training on legal matters pertaining to the rights of indigenous people should be organized and indigenous punishment against violators should be strictly enforced.

Introduction

Marine and coastal resources provide mankind with economic and environmental services as well as a source of animal protein among island communities. But, the rampant use of illegal and destructive fishing methods along with the increasing demand for fish and other marine animal species in the international and domestic market, have resulted to widespread degradation of marine habitats (Pauly et al, 2002; Pomeroy et al, 2005).

In the Philippines, Palawan is the largest province and designated as Man and Biosphere Reserve in 1990 which includes two World Heritage sites, the Tubbataha Reef Natural Park and the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park. Marine resources in the province are bountiful and cover a remarkable biodiversity. Based on the fisheries profile of 2007, 19 per cent of the total marine catch in the municipal fisheries production came from Palawan. The Calamianes Group of Islands, which comprise the main islands of Busuanga, Culion, Coron and Linapacan, in the northern section of the province is one of the most productive fishing grounds and has relatively intact marine environments such as mangrove forests, seagrass beds and coral reefs (Werner and Allen, 2000). However, in the recent past, Calamianes marine resources have declined due to the wide-scale use of illegal, destructive fishing methods, encroachment of commercial fishing vessels into the municipal waters and resource use conflict (FISH Project, 2006). In the terrestrial realm, threats to Palawan biodiversity include illegal logging, conversion of forest to agricultural lands and other land uses. Recently, mining has also become a serious threat, not only to the loss of habitat of species but also to the lives of indigenous

people. The rights of indigenous people to claim their ancestral domain are at risk because lands have been converted to mining sites even before they can apply for their ancestral domain claim.

Coron Island is declared as the ancestral domain of the Calamian Tagbanwa indigenous people. According to the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA, 1997, Section 3a), ancestral domain refers to:

all areas generally belonging to the indigenous cultural communities or indigenous peoples (ICCs or IPs) comprising lands, inland waters, coastal areas and natural resources therein, held under a claim of ownership, occupied or possessed by ICCs/IPs by themselves or through their ancestors, communally or individually since time immemorial, continuously to the present except when interrupted by war, force majeure or displacement by force, deceit, stealth or as a consequence of government projects or any other voluntary dealings entered into by government and private individuals/corporations, and which are necessary to ensure their economic, social and cultural welfare. It shall include ancestral lands, forests, pasture, residential, agricultural and other lands individually owned whether alienable and disposable or otherwise, hunting grounds, burial grounds, worship areas, bodies of water, mineral and other natural resources.

The Calamian Tagbanwa are different from the Tagbanwa found in the mainland of Palawan province. The Calamian Tagbanwa's way of life is anchored in the sea while the Tagbanwas' in the mainland spend time in the riverbanks and valleys (Wright, cited in Eder and Fernandez, 1996). The Calamian Tagbanwa established a sustainable way of life that was in harmony with nature, their avoidance of their sacred areas and existing taboos played a role in the conservation of biological diversity in the ancestral domain and helped sustain their life support system. Taboo areas around Coron Island serve as a reminder of their own culture and these sites are ecologically intact. Today, the Calamian Tagbanwa face challenges about how they can maintain the ecological balance along with the economic, social and cultural changes and the intrusion of migrant fishers around their ancestral waters. The

dwindling marine resources in the *teeb ang surublien* (ancestral waters) of the Calamian Tagbanwa are attributed to the trends mentioned above resulting in the destruction of coral reef communities in their traditional fishing grounds (Luchavez, 1991; PAFID, 2000; Sampang 2005, 2007). Understanding the behavior of resource users is imperative for a successful management (Jentoft, cited in Sabetian, 2002). This chapter examines the customary fishing practices of the Calamian Tagbanwa and how they address the threats in their ancestral waters.

Coron Island Ancestral Domain: Biodiversity and legal establishment

Coron Island is a wedge-shaped limestone island located in the southeastern side of Busuanga Island at 11° 55' N and 120° 13' E. It is composed of two villages, Banwang Daan and Cabugao. The majority of the population is Calamian Tagbanwa, while immigrants coming from the Visayas region of the country are a minority.

The Calamianes Group of Islands hosts several rare fish species such as blenny (*Ecsenius kurti* and *Istiblennius coleii*) and dottyback (*Labracinus atrofasciatus*) (Werner and Allen, 2000). The Coron Island ancestral domain covers 7320ha of ancestral land and 16,958ha of ancestral waters (see Figure 24.1). The island is dominated by Permian limestone of Jurassic origin, forming rugged terrains and steep cliffs. The domain has different ecosystem types such as coral reefs, seagrass, mangroves, brackish lagoons and limestone forests that support an outstanding biodiversity. There is a high rate of floral endemism and wildlife species reported are the Philippine macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*), wild pigs (*Sus barbatus*), Palawan porcupine (*Hystrix pumila*), Palawan stink badger (*Mydaus marchei*), Palawan hornbill (*Anthracoceros marchei*), various parrot species (*Tanygnathus lucionensis*, *Gracula religiosa*), green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) and sea cow (*Dugong dugon*) (NIPAP, 2000). Coron Island is also known for Balinsasayaw (*Callocalia troglodytes*), this swiftlet produces the edible nest, made of gelatinous secretion from the salivary glands of the bird.

In 1967, Coron Island was first declared as a National Reserve, then later in 1978 as a Tourist

Zone and Marine Reserve. The Tagbanwa Tribe of Coron Island Association (TTCIA) formerly known as the Tagbanwa Foundation of Coron Island (TFCI) applied for a Community Forest Stewardship Agreement (CFSA) with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and it was granted in 1990. The Calamian Tagbanwa realized that the CFSA is limited to land stewardship, increasing concern about how their traditional fishing grounds can be protected from illegal and destructive fishing practices; they began to search for solutions. During the passage of the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) in 1992, Coron Island was included in the priority protected area under the National Integrated Protected Areas Programme (NIPAP) and the Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan also expanded the definition of ancestral domain to include the coastal zones and submerged areas. Then, in 1993, DENR passed an administrative order, which provides recognition and awarding of Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC). The Calamian Tagbanwa started to comply with all the necessary documents with the help of Philippine Association for Intercultural Development (PAFID). With the passing of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act in 1997, the indigenous peoples in the country now have a support system that can protect their rights over their ancestral domain. Finally, in 1998, the struggle of the Calamian Tagbanwa to be recognized was over, Coron Island was granted its ancestral domain claim by the DENR including the ancestral waters and issued a CADC. The CADC was issued pursuant to the DENR administrative order. The increasing fishing pressure around the waters of their domain has led them to assert their legal rights to control and manage the resources. The Calamian Tagbanwa was the first indigenous people to be granted of an ancestral water claim. When the IPRA law was enacted, the National Commission on Indigenous People took over as the implementing agency and passed an administrative order to convert the CADC to Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT). In 2002, there were a lot of criticisms and resolutions passed such as re-evaluation of the delineated boundaries in the claim of the Calamian Tagbanwa hindering the awarding of the title. The National

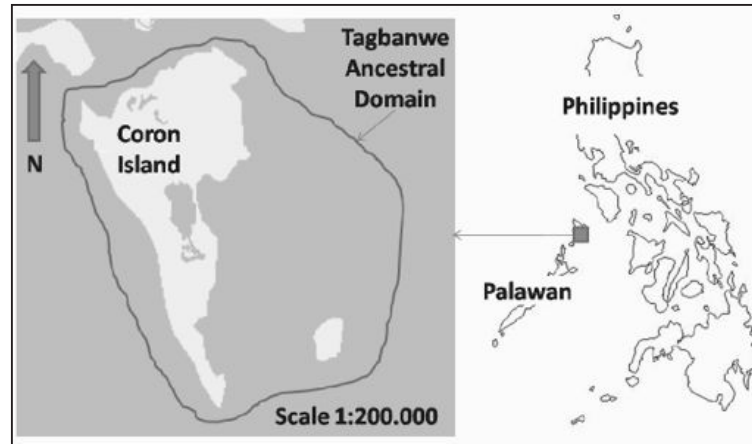


Figure 24.1 Map of the ancestral domain of the Calamian Tagbanwa in Coron Island, Palawan, Philippines

Source: PAFID. Composed by Bas Verschuuren and Arlene Sampang

Commission on Indigenous People then reviewed and revalidated the submitted documents and in 2004, Coron Island finally received their CADT.

Coron Island is an example of a community conserved area, defined as 'natural and modified ecosystems, including significant biodiversity, ecological services and cultural values, voluntarily conserved by indigenous peoples and local and mobile communities through customary laws or other effective means' (Borrini-Feyerabend et al, 2004, pxvi). The sacred or forbidden areas inside the ancestral domain such as lakes, beaches and marine areas make it equivalent to the IUCN management Category Ia, Strict nature reserve, and Category V, Protected landscape/seascape. The management of Coron Island Ancestral Domain involves three entities, the Council of Elders, Tagbanwa Tribe of Coron Island and the village officials of Banwang Daan and Cabugao.

Sacred and restricted areas inside the ancestral domain

Lakes found in the ancestral domain are considered sacred by the Calamian Tagbanwa. It is strictly prohibited to enter these areas unless for cultural purposes such as performing rituals. Cabugao Lake, the largest lake found in the island is considered to be the centre of spirits. Only two lakes were

allowed for tourism namely the Kayangan (Figure 24.2) and Luluyuwan (also known as Barracuda Lake). Both lakes have been given awards for the cleanest lake in the Philippines, but the Kayangan Lake now holds a Presidential Hall of Fame award for consistently winning from 1997 to 1999. Beaches that serve as burial grounds of their ancestors are also prohibited to visitors, only seven out of 33 beaches were open for tourism.

Sacred areas, locally known as panyaan, are areas in the sea where the Calamian Tagbanwa believes that there are spirits dwelling in the place. A panyaan is usually a big rock or coral reef formation that is separated from its main structure and in relatively deep waters. The Calamian Tagbanwa believes that a kunlalabyut or giant octopus lives in this area. This cultural knowledge is passed down from elders to the younger generation through oral tradition. Not all Calamian Tagbanwa were able to go to the sacred areas, they had to have a definite purpose if they intended to go there. Elders (mamaepet) and shaman (bawalyan) played a major role when entering sacred areas. The elders or shamans utter uliwatwat, a prayer addressing the spirits requesting to enter the sacred areas. Names of sacred areas and species found in the island show how they are interconnected with the marine environment. Some names of the sacred areas pertain to the morphological structure of the rock or reef formation and behavioural activity of



Figure 24.2 Entrance to Kayangan Lake, sacred to the Calamian Tagbanwa

Source: Arlene Sampang

the giant octopus dwelling in the area. Ten such panyaan exist on the island.

Fish sanctuaries are considered restricted areas. They are not allowed to fish, drop anchors or to culture seaweeds. There are six traditional fish sanctuaries on the island.

Methods

Initial discussions were made through the Tagbanwa Tribe of Coron Island Association regarding the assessment of the customary fishing practices. In compliance with the implementing rules and regulations of IPRA, a free and prior informed consent (FPIC) process was undertaken. As an instrument of empowerment, the FPIC process enables the indigenous people to determine whether they will accept or reject the proposed project if they see that it is not in their

priority needs. General assemblies were conducted in Banwang Daan and Cabugao to discuss the details of the purpose of the assessment (see Figure 24.3). The Calamian Tagbanwa openly accepted the research project and resolutions of consent were passed by both villages, coming from the Council of Elders, TTCIA and the Village Captain. This application then went to the municipal and provincial level for certification.

The assessment was carried out mainly by interviews and focus group discussions with the Council of Elders, officials of the village and TTCIA, and the members of the community. Customary law about the ancestral waters stated in the Calamian Tagbanwa's Ancestral Domain Management Plan (ADMP) was used as a guideline to assess the current fishing practices (TFCI, 1998). The assessment also covered the fishing activities and resource use patterns of the Calamian



Figure 24.3 General assembly in Cabugao village discussing the details of the research project

Source: Arlene Sampang

Tagbanwa. Explanations about the customary practices that were not clear to the younger generations were also expounded by the Elders.

Results

Banwang Daan and Cabugao fishers mainly fish on the three traditional fishing grounds inside their ancestral domain. They fish mainly for subsistence, although some Calamian Tagbanwa families are engaged in small-scale trading of live groupers, fresh food fish as well as marine invertebrates such as octopus, sea cucumber and seashells. Reef gleaning is mostly done by women. The fishing season for the Calamian Tagbanwa lasts from June to November (southwest monsoon or Abagat). Rough sea conditions during the months of December to May brought by strong winds associated with kamian (northeast monsoon), make

it a lean season for fishers. Fishing gear mostly used during the southwest and northeast monsoons are hook and line, spears and gill net. Fishing is carried out using small double outrigger canoes as well as rafts and motorboats. Transmission of knowledge on fishing such as making fishing gear starts as young as six years old. It is evident as well that the fishing skills of the Calamian Tagbanwa are changing. According to the elders, their ancestors used hand instruments like a trident spear for sea cucumbers and more often gathered sea shells. Nowadays, because of the demand for live groupers, the younger generations of fishers more often use hook and line. Slowly, the use of traditional fishing gear such as tridents is disappearing, also related to the dwindling stocks available for harvest. The average catch of fish has declined from 3kg per day (Luchavez, 1991) to 1.18–1.32kg per day (Sampang, 2007). Declining fish catch is attributed

to degraded fishing areas because of the illegal and destructive fishing methods.

Other sources of livelihood among Calamian Tagbanwa are farming, weaving mats and harvesting luray (edible birds' nests) during the months of December to May. These nests are used to make the popular Nido soup, a delicacy in Chinese cuisine. The trade between the Chinese and the Calamian Tagbanwa dates back to the pre-Spanish colonization in the Philippines.

Based on their customary laws, fishing is prohibited in restricted and sacred areas. However, observance of the customary laws depends on the values and motivation of the fishers. Two views emerged during the course of the assessment. First, those who are still in observance of the taboo are enveloped with fear over the sea spirits inhabiting the area and they have high respect for the elders. They believe that unusual events can still happen. Second are those that are non-observers of the fishing taboo. Some fishers tend to visit or fish in these areas because of the influential activities of the migrant fishers living in the island. Others have changed their religious beliefs system and no longer consider that spirits dwelling in the sacred areas can bring them harm, although they still respect the teachings of the elders. Factors affecting the behavior of fishers especially the younger generations are also brought by modernization.

Discussion and recommendation

Achieving ancestral domain certificate

The DENR in 1996, passed the Department Administrative Order 34 (DAO 34) providing the guidelines for the management of the ancestral claim. When the Calamian Tagbanwas' struggle for recognition of their ancestral domain claim was granted in 1998, they organized a workshop to draft their initial Ancestral Domain Management Plan. The existing plan only covers regulatory framework of laws pertinent to their legal rights in the ancestral domain, indigenous punishments and customary laws to guide resource use and developments in the area and the Kayangan lake visitor management, among others. However, the management plan lacks other information that

could be a basis for monitoring and evaluation in the future. In addition, during the formulation, there was no participation of other management constituents such as the Local Government Unit (LGU) and other stakeholder groups. The status of the restricted and sacred areas helps them identify options and strengthen their management strategies in the formulation of their Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSDPP). This is a long-term plan that will guide them in the sustainable management and development of their ancestral domain.

Today, very few of the customary rules are being followed. Elders have observed that these rules are ineffective nowadays. The fishing activities of the Calamian Tagbanwa and migrant fishers in the island motivated the management body of the ancestral domain to re-evaluate their role and responsibilities. Having different resource users on the island becomes a threat when there is no common vision for protecting their cultural heritage. The Council of Elders have a significant role in implementing the traditional means of discipline such as panglaw (the hands are tied and feet are placed in stocks) and burdun (12 lashes of rattan cane). Thus, the great challenge among the Elders is to revive their strict enforcement of customary rules such as respect for restricted and sacred areas and not catching juvenile species but allowing them to reach maturity and reproduce.

Fishing areas and customary fishing practices

Current activities in the restricted and sacred areas give an indication that they are not respected by migrant fishers in the island or those who occasionally visit the Calamianes Group of Islands. This calls for more dissemination of information about their customary practices. Baseline assessment of the existing restricted areas should be prioritized: knowing what area needs better protection and has the greater chance of fast recovery. The formulation of the management plan should capitalize on the traditional ecological knowledge and best fishing practices. Also, alternative livelihood options other than marine-based occupation should be identified. The managers of the ancestral domain will have

to explore more options on reducing the impact of fishing.

Capacity building and strengthening of cultural and environmental awareness

The Council of Elders, Tagbanwa Tribe Association and the village officials have roles and responsibilities for the ancestral domain to be managed successfully. Providing training and knowledge enhancement on legal matters will help them in tackling issues on law enforcement against violators as well as handling conflict resolution within and outside of the community. In their traditional enforcement scheme, if a non-Calamian Tagbanwa is apprehended, the violator has the option to undergo the customary law of the Calamian Tagbanwa or national law. The management plan must contain relevant biodiversity inventories; assisting and training them in the participatory resource assessment will equip them to have their own style of monitoring in the future.

Strengthening cultural identity and integrity will require effort from the Council of Elders. Continuous transmission of cultural knowledge and practices should be in place, such as in the form of sessions among the youth. This will help the younger generations to appreciate more the uniqueness of their identity in spite of urbanization and modernization. Environmental awareness activities, such as interpretative walks along a mangrove ecosystem discussing the importance of the mangrove trees among children to encourage them to appreciate the value of natural resources on the island, will be of great value.

Conclusions

Despite the opposition of the local government units and other stakeholders in the Calamianes region on the ancestral domain claim and criticisms faced by the Calamian Tagbanwa, they were able to succeed and got hold of their domain title through perseverance. However, maintaining the balance of the economic, social and cultural changes will challenge the Calamian Tagbanwa to be resilient in the rapid changes they will encounter. The formulation of their sustainable development and

protection plan calls for more participation among them to rethink what is the best solution for them to properly manage their cultural heritage.

Lessons are to be learned about the unique relationship of the Calamian Tagbanwa with nature. It has helped them to regain control of their cultural heritage. The case of an ancestral waters claim was a precedent among indigenous peoples in the Philippines to assert their indigenous rights with the assistance of the National Commission on Indigenous People. Sacred areas are invaluable to the Calamian Tagbanwa as these symbolize their culture. The destruction of their sacred areas and loss of biodiversity is closely linked to the loss of cultural knowledge. Resurgence of customary practices and strong community effort of the Calamian Tagbanwa will ensure the sustainable management and protection of sacred areas in Coron Island.

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