

5 KEY INSIGHTS for successful governance of large marine biosphere reserves and parks in Southeast Asia



POLICY INSIGHTS

1 Adapt governance of large marine parks and biosphere reserves to align with the context of implementation

2 Account for local power and politics

3 Balance freedom of decision-making bodies to innovate with accountability for shared goals

4 Invest in robust coordination or collaborative arrangements

5 Ensure that scaling up does not disenfranchise local stakeholders

A transition to large-scale marine parks and biosphere reserves is underway in Southeast Asia to conserve globally important biodiversity and improve the wellbeing of coastal communities. Drawing upon four case studies, this briefing provides policy insights into the challenges and opportunities for the establishment and governance of large marine parks and UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserves in Southeast Asia.

What is at stake?

Tropical marine and coastal ecosystems – coral reefs, mangroves, seagrasses – are vital for the livelihoods, food security and wellbeing of millions of people in Southeast Asia. These ecosystems are under mounting pressure from climate change, pollution and an increasing demand for marine resources. More effective governance of these ecosystems is essential to ensure they can benefit the people that depend upon them, long into the future. We therefore need new or improved approaches to – or innovations in – marine management.

Governance research from a four-year research capacity development programme, **GCRF Blue Communities**, analysed the development and implementation of three UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserves in

Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam, and a large marine park in Malaysian Borneo (Figure 1). These areas contain globally important biodiversity and significant human populations with high dependence on marine ecosystems.

As such, they are places to trial new ways of conserving biodiversity and maintaining healthy ecosystems while meeting the material needs and development aspirations of local communities.

Research on the four case studies revealed five key insights for governments, NGOs, and international agencies to consider for the effective governance of similar large marine biosphere reserves and parks in Southeast Asia and internationally.

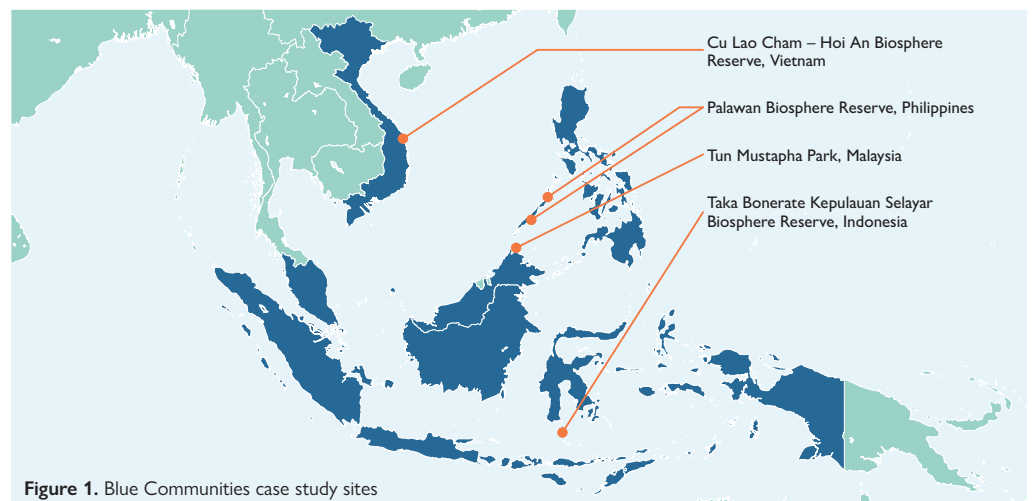


Figure 1. Blue Communities case study sites

Adapt governance of large marine reserves and parks to align with the context of implementation

The governance – including structures, policies, laws and organisations – of each country in Southeast Asia varies markedly.

It is necessary to understand the existing governance arrangements and to account for local political, socio-economic and ecological realities when planning and implementing large marine reserves and parks.

Stakeholders will have invested significantly in current approaches to managing the marine environment. Building upon and adding value to

these rather than starting afresh is more likely to secure stakeholder acceptance.

Adapting the design of large park/reserves to the local governance context can be complex because their geographic size means that they cross multiple administrative jurisdictions, including those of local, subnational and national government, various sectoral agencies, and even international borders. Creating institutional structures that foster collaboration between decision-making bodies to pursue common goals is therefore challenging but essential to achieve (Insight 4).



Account for local power and politics

Large marine reserves/parks are as much political as scientific or technical projects. There are many competing interests for marine space and resources within the boundaries of the parks/reserves, from small-scale fishing and mangrove harvesting to industrial fisheries and energy and tourism development. Sectoral stakeholders, government agencies and NGOs seek to further the interests of their constituents by influencing the rules and management activities of the reserves/parks. Each have variable power to determine what happens, and changes in political leadership or the termination of projects can depend on political will towards the reserve/park.

A more politically informed approach to the governance of large marine parks/reserves is

needed in Southeast Asia. This would require being more sensitive to who is recognised and included as stakeholders in decision-making processes, giving a meaningful voice to those traditionally marginalised, and assessing the fairness of the distribution of costs and benefits of rules, policies and actions. It might also require anticipating political and programme cycles to promote consistency towards longer-term objectives.

Essentially, decisions need to be made based on principles of justice and equity rather than the interests of those who are most powerful.



Photograph by Western Philippines University

INSIGHT
3

Balance freedom of decision-making bodies to innovate with accountability for shared goals

Rather than a single authority, various organisations have some autonomy to make decisions for their respective jurisdiction within the park/reserve, be it fisheries, tourism or conservation, or coastal waters versus offshore waters. This freedom can enable some decision-making bodies to be more progressive in implementing sustainable development than others. However, it can also be used to advance sectoral or local interests and agendas at the expense of the broader goals of the reserve/park, including conservation or poverty alleviation goals. The park/reserve can therefore be the sum of many divergent goals rather than everyone working towards a common vision.

In more decentralised governance contexts, this divergence can result from there being a lack of accountability mechanisms to ensure that higher-level, commonly agreed goals are delivered.

In contrast, in more centralised governance contexts, local decision-making bodies may be unable to resist initiatives or policies imposed from high-level government that contravene the objectives of the park/reserve (Box 1).

Freedom to innovate therefore needs to be balanced with accountability mechanisms that ensure compliance with shared rules and the pursuit of common goals, and avoid management being co-opted opportunistically for aims incongruent with sustainability and equity. Examples of accountability mechanisms include: joint policy and reporting; clear and shared objectives and milestones; multi-stakeholder committees with authority to hold others to account; advisory or oversight boards; and funding tied to delivery of shared objectives.

Box 1: Too much or too little autonomy?

In the Palawan UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, municipalities have significant autonomy to manage their adjacent coastal waters in a context of decentralised governance. Rules and initiatives made for the reserve rely on the cooperation of municipal governments to implement and prioritise resources. Only some municipal governments have used their autonomy to progress marine zoning, resulting in a patchwork of implementation across the municipal waters of the islands. In contrast, in the Cu Lao Cham - Hoi An UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, tourism and fisheries regulations and licenses are issued by provincial government, making it difficult for the marine protected area (MPA) management board and local government to control development pressures.



Invest in robust coordination or collaborative arrangements

Having many decision-making bodies responsible for elements of park/reserve management can result in overlapping responsibilities, inefficiencies in management, and barriers to the sharing of information. Multi-stakeholder collaborative forums or steering groups are established to coordinate management and policies, and to facilitate collaboration. Additionally or alternatively, an organisation, such as a park authority, tries to bridge the different decision-making bodies and stakeholders. These coordination mechanisms, however, were said to be ineffective, inactive or lacking in authority to ensure that decisions made were acted upon. This was caused by resource constraints, a lack of power to hold members to account for agreed actions, and their co-option by powerful political interests. Thus, without robust

co-ordination mechanisms, uncoordinated and conflicting policies and actions can reduce the effectiveness and efficiency of achieving goals.

Investment in and sustainable financing of coordinative mechanisms is therefore essential for the successful implementation of large marine reserves/parks in Southeast Asia.

This requires: equitable opportunities for representation and participation; enduring bonds of trust between members; sustainable financing for after the termination of donor projects; and decision-making processes that facilitate the fair negotiation of trade-offs from new management rules and interventions.

Ensure that scaling up does not disenfranchise local stakeholders

Implementing larger-scale management can mean that more decisions are made at a high level, and thus further away from local government, communities and resource users. The research found that local stakeholders commonly felt disconnected from decision-making that affected them, which encouraged non-compliance with park/reserve rules (Box 2).

Adequate communication to, consultation with, and participation of local communities and stakeholders in decision-making processes is therefore needed. Some decision-making power may need to be retained by or devolved to local institutions, including community institutions and those representing marginalised groups, while maintaining accountability for the delivery of common goals of the reserve/park.

Box 2: Risks to stakeholder participation of large-scale marine management

In Palawan (Philippines), like many Southeast Asian countries, there is a long history of community-based marine management and co-management between communities and local government. In Malaysia, in contrast, there is a tradition of top-down marine park governance, within which the management of Tun Mustapha Park and other multi-use marine parks is implemented. In both these cases, communities felt disconnected from reserve/park governance or were unaware of its management strategies. This highlights the challenge of introducing and/or maintaining community participation in the implementation of large-scale marine reserves/parks.

About GCRF Blue Communities and this research

Blue Communities is a four-year research capacity-building programme for marine planning in Southeast Asia, funded by the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). The programme has 12 interconnected research projects.

This briefing is a product of project 2 that studied the governance of the four case study reserves and parks using the Participatory Marine Governance Analysis (PMGA) toolkit. The project enables stakeholders to systematically analyse the governance context within which they are working, learn from each other, and reflect on how to improve the performance of marine governance.

Recommended citation for this briefing: Fortnam, M., Evans, L., Amira Mas Ayu, A. M., Bastian, L., Chaigneau, T., Creencia, L., Goh, H. C., Gonzales, B., Madarcos, K., Maharja, C., Mohd Iqbal, M., Ngoc Le, T., Praptiwi, R. A., Sugardjito, J., Van Nguyen, Q., Wan Nur Syazana, W. M. A. (2022). Five Key Insights for successful governance of large marine biosphere reserves and parks in Southeast Asia. GCRF Blue Communities Programme, Exeter, UK.

For further information, contact: Dr Matt Fortnam, University of Exeter (m.fortnam@exeter.ac.uk)