

From sacred areas to the creation of marine protected areas in the Bijagós archipelago  
(Guinea Bissau, West Africa)

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The Bijagos islands, the only deltaic archipelago on the Atlantic coast of Africa, comprises 80 islands and covers an area of nearly 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> off the coast of Guinea Bissau. It is a patchwork of mudflats, mangroves, palm groves and savanna grasslands which produce a wide diversity and abundance of natural resources. The archipelago currently has a population of some 25,000 inhabitants, the vast majority of whom belong to the Bijago ethnic group.

The Bijagos' production system is based on the extensive and diversified use of natural resources within a subsistence economy. Although only about 20 of the islands are permanently inhabited, the entire archipelago is used according to age-old management traditions. Rainfed rice, grown mainly in the palm groves, is the staple of the Bijagos' diet. The palm groves are also a source of food products such as oil and palm wine. Dietary animal proteins come chiefly from shellfish collected by the women on the mudflats, and to a lesser extent from fish caught in cast-nets or using wicker or stone traps at low tide. The salient feature of the archipelago's economy is its high degree of self-sufficiency.

The Bijagos people possess a strong and distinctive ethnic culture which revolves around a number of holy places (e.g. inlets, capes and islands) used for ceremonies and rites of initiation. These sites, whose sacred status foreshadows the modern concept of protected areas, have afforded de facto protection to the archipelago's tremendous biodiversity, including such symbolically important species as sea turtles, manatees and hippopotamus, all of which hold an important place in the Bijagos' cosmogony. This sacred connection and the natural and cultural heritage value stemming from it were acknowledged through the establishment of two National Parks and the designation of the Bijagos archipelago Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1996, thus affirming the international importance of the area.

In recent decades, a number of external influences have begun to jeopardize the harmony of the islands. Today the archipelago is a target for many who wish to exploit its resources. Its fisheries resources are a magnet to industrial-scale fishing vessels from Europe and China, while artisanal pirogue fishermen flock to the area from neighbouring countries where fish stocks are already well on the way to being depleted. The latter come in search of vulnerable quarry such as sharks, whose fins are in high demand on Asian markets. The harmonious and pristine landscapes have also attracted the attention of foreign tourism developers. Market globalisation is driving a trend towards the gradual monetarisation of the Bijagos economy, increasingly favouring cash crops such as cashew nuts, which in some places are now supplanting the traditional palm groves.

Other more alarming threats are also appearing on the horizon, among them offshore oil drilling and shipbreaking yards with their legacy of pollution and social problems.

These new pressures from the outside are exerted with little heed to the fact that Bijagos society is totally dependent on a healthy environment. As fish stocks decline, their traditional fishing methods and gear no longer guarantee sufficiently large catches. Tourism development leads to conflict when it sets its sights on sacred lands or depletes local resources such as oysters; it also contributes to serious social and cultural disruption. The gradual shift to cashew nut farming also has adverse effects, i.e. alcoholism and jeopardized food security.

In order to ensure that these new developments do not destroy the social, cultural and environmental stability underpinning the archipelago, partnerships have been set up under the banner of the Biosphere Reserve. A zoning process defining the types of use allowed in different areas was put in place with the islanders' participating in all stages. Drawing on technical support from IUCN and financial support from various donors, Guinea Bissau designated two marine protected areas - Orango National Park (1582 km<sup>2</sup>) and Joao Vieira-Poilao National Marine Park (495 km<sup>2</sup>). However, both are now in a slightly vulnerable position due to their reliance on external support. This state of affairs is further exacerbated by shrinking international development assistance and the unstable domestic political situation in a country which lacks the basic means needed to enforce protection measures in its National Parks.

Given this context, the Urok islands (Formosa, Nago and Chedia) Community Protected Area is a model which may better meet the conservation requirements of the archipelago. The process leading to the establishment of this MPA was initiated in 1993, at the inauguration of the headquarters of the Biosphere Reserve, the Bijagos Environment and Culture Centre. National NGOs including Tiniguena were invited and asked to propose development activities which would be beneficial to local communities. The event provided an opportunity to meet with the Formosa island authorities, who asked Tiniguena to help them improve living conditions and protect their coastal resources which were under threat due to the influx of migrant fishermen. Tiniguena was very sensitive to this request, being aware that Formosa and the surrounding islands not only make up one of the most valuable areas in terms of natural and cultural value, but also that they are the most heavily exposed to outside pressures.

Initially, Tiniguena focused its support on more effective use of natural resources, with a view to increasing food security and building local capacity. As the process moved forward, the direction gradually shifted to more conservation-oriented action. The need for a shared vision became obvious; work began to arrive at a common understanding which would be the basis for future planning scenarios. The exercise took place within a framework of consultation and negotiation on the issue of sustainable land and resource management, rounded off with a number of social and cultural events and activities (theatre, dance and local cuisine...).

Consultation was organised by village, by island and also for the entire group of islands, resulting in the creation of the following co-management bodies: village committees, island assemblies and the Urok Assembly, in addition to which a Council of Elders was set up. One of the outcomes of the consultation process was an agreed set of rules governing how the area should be used; these entail a zoning plan which divides the coastal portion of Urok into three parts. The mangrove area and its associated channels are recognised as crucial habitats for resources and biodiversity, and can be used only for subsistence and ceremonial fishing. This is the area which is foreseen to meet food security, sociocultural and environmental requirements. A second zone runs from the seaward side of the mangroves and encompasses the secondary channels; here access to resources for commercial use is reserved for local residents, thus guaranteeing them economic security. Beyond this the third zone stretches to the marine boundary of the protected area; it is open to commercial exploitation by outside fishermen under certain specific conditions.

The experience of the Urok Community MPA has been positive on many counts, most of which are related to the presence of traditional resident communities:

- These communities possess extensive knowledge about ecosystem functioning and natural resources, and this can be invaluable when drafting management rules, especially when there is little time or money to be spent on scientific research.
- Resident communities to whom exclusive or priority access to resources is granted have a direct interest in ensuring that the system remains sustainable, including through taking part in surveillance on-site.
- Social and cultural extension work is an effective instrument for helping communities to adapt to modern problems and challenges and for helping stakeholders to become more aware of and committed to preserving their heritage.
- Building capacity within the population in the areas of dialogue, consensus on a shared vision, negotiation/advocacy and decision-making, are key success factors for securing involvement and achieving sustainable management of areas and resources by communities, while allowing them to reclaim their territorial sovereignty.
- The consultation and participatory management process which led to the creation of the community MPA are an experience in governance from which many valuable lessons can be drawn, to the benefit of Guinea Bissau and other West African coastal societies alike.
- Direct participation by the local residents in defining and implementing rules for resource use makes the protected area less vulnerable to external political and financial vicissitudes.

- Protecting nationally and internationally important biodiversity is impossible without the support of the State and international partners in the areas of surveillance, conflict resolution and enforcement, as well as in achieving national development goals.

Alongside comparable initiatives such as the Bolon de Bamboung protection initiative in Senegal, the Urok experience and its lessons are highly useful in dealing with sensitive ecosystems and traditional communities throughout the West African coastal zone, where intensive natural resource use and the development of a migrant fishery jeopardize sustainability.