MPA Spotlight: Profiling the Debate Over Reopening Tsitsikamma National Park to Fishing

In South Africa in 2006-2007, a debate was waged over whether to reopen part of Tsitsikamma National Park to fishing. Designated in 1964, the park is among the oldest MPAs in Africa and has been fully no-take since 2000. The nation’s Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) proposed last year that roughly one-tenth of the park be re-opened to line-fishing by members of local communities on a controlled and monitored basis. The proposal was contested by biologists and conservationists who said reopening the protected area would be a step backward for marine conservation.

Below, MPA News summarizes the cases that were made for and against reopening Tsitsikamma, based on interviews with government personnel and scientists. The government’s final decision is also provided.

Background

Tsitsikamma National Park, on the southeast coast of South Africa, is a 60-km-long protected area that includes a narrow strip of coastal forest and extends 3 nm out to sea. Recreational line-fishing from the shore was initially allowed at a number of sites in the MPA, but was reduced to a 3-km length of shoreline in 1978. In 2000, that area was closed, too, to protect collapsing reef fish populations, and because middle- to up-market tourism was flourishing without fishing.

Disputes over fishing rights to the area have persisted since the designation of the park. In 1994, local fishermen formed the Tsitsikamma Angling Forum to negotiate with authorities, and in early 2006 the group requested access to 50% of Tsitsikamma for line-fishing. The Minister of DEAT authorized a task team in late 2006 to investigate the possibility that 10% could be reopened. The task team proposed such a management action in April 2007, subject to further exploration of the likely impacts of the proposal.

In September 2007, frustrated with what they perceived as slow progress on the access question, 70 members of the angling forum forced their way into the park and spent the day fishing illegally in one of the proposed open areas. A final proposal from DEAT, which recommended opening 13% of the MPA but restricting access to only two days per month per fisher, was referred to the Minister in October 2007.

Arguments for reopening

The main argument in favor of allowing limited line-fishing from shore was to normalize a situation where progressively stricter conservation measures had been imposed without the broad support of communities living directly landward of the park. Poor to middle-income people living within only 3-5 km of the sea typically have to travel between 20 and 60 km to go angling. Notably, shore angling is allowed throughout the adjacent Robberg MPA about 60 km to the west, as well as the Goukamma MPA 100 km away.

Reopening part of the park to fishing would build support from these communities for the park and its conservation measures. The communities would in fact be direct beneficiaries of those conservation measures, which currently favor more affluent residents who live or own properties along the boundaries of the park. The proposal was intentionally made for recreational fishing so as not to divide communities between those who might have qualified for subsistence access (if it were to be allowed) and those who would not.

Because many of the marine species inside the park are highly resident, areas that were proposed to remain closed would conceivably be affected very little by fishing in the open areas. Thus the closed areas would continue to provide conservation and stock-building benefits outside the MPA. Although catch rates of most species would be expected to decline inside the open areas, an experimental approach (for a period of 12 months) would monitor and evaluate the impacts of the reopening and respond adaptively to any unforeseen effects.

Arguments against reopening

Tsitsikamma protects populations of many species of reef fish, which have been heavily depleted by exploitation. Advances in fishing gear and continuing escalation in fishing pressure outside the MPA make it imperative that the site remains uncompromised. The fishery outside the park is poorly managed with inadequate enforcement, and there is a significant contrast in the density and size structure of fish populations across MPA boundaries. Catch data from the 3-km fishing area prior to 2000 indicate that fishing on the scale that was proposed could deplete a number of resident fish species in the areas in as little as one year. Should this happen, it is likely that anglers would request access to other parts of Tsitsikamma, with the potential for depleting those portions, too, if the requests were granted.

The MPA is relatively large by global standards and people who reside in the area claim that they are unfairly disadvantaged. While this may be the case, the MPA has been in existence since 1964 (although largely open to shore angling up to 1978) and lies adjacent to a relatively lowly-populated part of the coastline. Most settlement in this area took place after 1964. Compromising the MPA would likely lead to further recruitment losses to adjacent areas, where many more people are dependent on existing commercial and recreational fisheries.

Closing areas elsewhere - outside Tsitsikamma - to compensate for reopening part of the MPA has been proposed. But one would have to wait decades before these areas could be expected to build up the conservation capital that lies in Tsitsikamma. Most of the fish species are slow-growing, long-lived species (>20 years of age).

Conclusion

In November 2007, DEAT Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk ruled to keep Tsitsikamma fully no-take. He cited MPAs as being a key part of South Africa’s strategy to manage vulnerable ecosystems in a sustainable way, providing the life-support system needed to resuscitate ailing oceans and collapsing fish stocks. He added that because of the country’s forward-looking approach, South Africa “counts amongst the world leaders” in implementing MPA-related goals set at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. Of South Africa’s coastline, 18% is in protected areas.

Van Schalkwyk also noted that the fishers were recreational (so food security was not an issue); that the reasons for designating the MPA and the underlying circumstances had not changed since his predecessor closed it to fishing in 2000; and that opening the MPA for exploitation would set “a dangerous precedent” for conservation at sea and on land. He added that because of various practical constraints, it would be difficult for effective measures to be put in place to ensure compliance with permit conditions. “MPAs are a short-term sacrifice for a worthwhile long-term gain,” wrote van Schalkwyk in a media statement. “Opening the MPA for the exclusive use by a few will bring into question the value of MPAs by the remainder of fisherfolk.”

For more information

Tsitsikamma National Park official website
www.sanparks.org/parks/tsitsikamma

Media statement by Environment Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk


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