

MPA NEWS

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South Africa's oldest MPA may be reopened to fishing

South Africa's oldest MPA is in limbo now as it awaits a government decision on whether to reopen it to fishing, as requested by local anglers.

Designated in 1964, the 639-km² Tsitsikamma National Park (TNP) protects healthy intertidal and subtidal ecosystems and associated populations of reef fish and invertebrates. Fish populations in TNP are between 5 and 21 times more abundant than in adjacent fished areas. Since 2000, all of TNP has been no-take.

In 2007 and again in 2010, proposals were made by communities living adjacent to the reserve to allow limited shore fishing. In both cases the relevant environment ministers at the time followed advice from scientists that the marine resources protected within TNP were too valuable to be fished. Opening the reserve to fishing, according to the ministers, would provide only short-term benefits to relatively few people.

However, on 19 November 2015, in response to continued pressure from local communities, including threats by fishers to close down the park and to harass hikers and tourists, the South African Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) gazetted a proposed rezoning and opening of four areas of TNP for recreational shore fishing, exclusively by communities adjacent to the park (<https://oct.to/Zkr>). The four areas represent about 20% of the park. The deadline for public comments on the proposal was 1 February 2016.

Taking matters further, on 29-30 November, South African National Parks (SANParks, which manages TNP) announced it had signed an agreement with the local fishing forum to open the four areas even before the conclusion of the public consultation, as a trial. The four areas were then opened on 15 December. SANParks rushed a monitoring program into effect to oversee this, with monitors recruited, trained, and deployed within a period of five days.

On 8 January 2016, a court order halted the fishing again to allow time for the full public consultation to occur and for a formal decision on rezoning to be made. The ruling was spurred by a lawsuit by Friends of Tsitsikamma, a conservation NGO.

Now everyone awaits the government decision. "Unfortunately there have been a number of dangerous precedents set here," says Bruce Mann, senior scientist at the Oceanographic Research Institute in Durban, South Africa. "These include a lack of due process (the fishing started prior to completion of public consultation) and the granting of exclusive extractive rights for recreational fishing to a limited number of people living adjacent to a protected area." The threat to disrupt the park if extractive rights are not granted, he adds, is also not a good precedent for protected areas, marine or terrestrial, in South Africa.

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