An assessment of governance of marine and coastal resources on Koh Tao, Thailand

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A B S T R A C T

This was the first assessment of marine and coastal resource governance on Koh Tao, a small island in the Western Gulf of Thailand. The study assessed perceptions of governance of marine and coastal resources among national and provincial authorities and Koh Tao residents on the basis of governance components – law, institutions and process – and governance principles – transparency, participation, rule of law, accountability and access to justice. Governance to deal with the anticipated continued growth in marine-based tourism is challenged. The study identified misunderstandings about governance and governance weaknesses, which, if they are not addressed, will be obstacles to the future sustainable development of Koh Tao. The research findings indicate that supporting local governance will be key to maintaining sustainable use of marine and coastal resources on the island and ensuring the sustainability of the local economy, which depends on these resources. We suggest a number of recommendations that can apply generally in countries wishing to conserve marine and coastal biodiversity and use those resources sustainably on coasts and islands.

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1. Introduction

Around the world, coastal zones and islands have been experiencing environmental degradation caused by coastal development, resulting in pollution and destruction of ecosystems (Martínez et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2014). Characteristics of islands make them vulnerable to extreme natural events such as storms and cyclones, coastal erosion, and the risks associated with sea level rise (Hay et al., 2013; UNGA, 1994). Significant impacts from climate change and natural disasters are becoming more frequent and destructive (Kelman, 2011). Because of the interlinkages among anthropogenic impacts and ecosystem degradation, there are several dimensions of integration that need to be addressed to achieve effective coastal and marine resource governance (Cicin–Sain and Knecht, 1998).

The institutions and individuals responsible for governing islands and coastal zones grapple daily with balancing increasing demands for local development, often intensified by tourism, with freshwater scarcity and inefficient waste management systems, among other constraints (Hay, 2013; UNGA, 1994). Effective governance has been identified as one prominent factor that can enhance sustainability and resilience on islands (Hay, 2013; Hay et al., 2013; Polido et al., 2014; Singh, 2014; Fernandes et al., 2015; Farhan and Lim, 2013) and in coastal communities (U.S. Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System Program, 2007).

Governance systems are most effective when they recognize and enhance participatory processes involving stakeholders and particularly take into account local issues involving cultural heritage, gender considerations, social cohesion, and traditional and indigenous knowledge (UNEP, 2014). Effective governance has been largely responsible for the success of coastal management projects in the Philippines and Indonesia (Christie et al., 2005; White et al., 2005; Lowry et al., 2005; Eisma et al., 2005; White et al., 2006; Farhan and Lim, 2013). These projects identified the following governance mechanisms as contributing to sustainable development in coastal zones and on islands: supportive legal and institutional arrangements; institutional continuity beyond leadership.
change; stable financial support; inter-governmental coordination mechanisms; communication and dissemination of information; stakeholder participation; equitable law enforcement and benefit sharing; means for ensuring accountability; and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Thailand, with extensive coastlines, hundreds of islands, and a decentralized national government, delegates responsibilities to sub-national government authorities in coastal areas and on islands. Recent studies along the southern coast of Thailand identified three primary factors that influenced successful marine and coastal governance: improving sectoral coordination; improving communication; and strengthening the role of local leadership (Satumanatpan et al., 2014; Satumanatpan and Chuenpagdee, 2015).

The 2004 tsunami revealed the weaknesses in the governance of coastal and island natural resources in Thailand and the other five countries most affected by the tsunami. During 2007–2008, the Thailand Environment Institute, under the auspices of the Mangroves for the Future (MFF) initiative, carried out a desk-based overview of coastal and island governance in the country to establish a baseline for future work (Thailand Environment Institute, 2008). Ten years later, in 2014, again with support from MFF and in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme, Mahidol University undertook an in-depth field study of governance of marine and coastal resources on Koh Tao, reported here, which used the 2007–2008 overview as a starting point to examine how local people on Koh Tao understand governance, how they participate in it, and the impact they perceive it has on their lives and livelihoods. This was the first assessment of marine and coastal resource governance conducted on Koh Tao.

The researchers who carried out the 2007–2008 reviews of coastal and island governance in six tsunami-affected countries established a framework of components and principles of governance that were common to definitions and descriptions of governance proposed by United Nations agencies, multilateral development banks, regional economic integration organizations, bilateral international aid agencies, and think tanks beginning from the mid-1990s (World Bank, 1992; ADB, 1999; IFAD, 1999; Graham et al., 2003; UNDP, 2009; Moore et al., 2011; UNDESA, UNDP, UNESCO, 2012; Borrini–Feyerabend et al., 2013; OHCHR, 2015). The 2007–2008 framework was based on three components of governance—laws, institutions, and processes—and five principles of governance—accountability, participation, transparency, rule of law, and access to justice. The current study used the same framework, which is reflected in the sections of this paper.

2. Study area

Koh Tao, or Turtle Island, is a small island of 21 km² located in the Samui archipelago in the western Gulf of Thailand (Fig. 1). It is dominated by granitic hills that rise to 379 m above mean sea level (MSL) and its coastline consists of small bays and coves separated by rocky granitic headlands (TISTR, 1995). In 2014, Koh Tao’s registered population included approximately 2032 Thais (1728 of whom were eligible to vote in municipal elections) and 4030 foreign laborers (mainly Myanmar nationals with a minority of Lao and Cambodian workers).

The island receives around 500,000 visitors each year, with tourism generating close to THB 6000 million/USD 183.5 million (at the 31 December 2013 exchange rate of USD 1 = THB 32.7) in 2013 (Department of Tourism, 2015). Massive, and largely unplanned and uncontrolled, tourism development which began in the late 1980s led to the decline of native forests and agricultural areas (Szuster and Dietrich, 2014; Wongthong and Harvey, 2014; DMCR, 2012; Weterings, 2011). This degradation, coupled with a shortage of freshwater and inadequate solid waste disposal and wastewater treatment (Saengsritorn and Kitworawut, 2010), contributed to the decline of coastal water quality and coral reef health (DMCR, 2012), similar to what has occurred in many coastal zones around the world (Martinez et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2014).

3. Methodology

The current study first undertook a desk review of the policy and legal basis for marine and coastal governance in Thailand generally and on Koh Tao in particular. The documentation reviewed included the Constitution, published government policy, national laws and national and provincial regulations, administrative guidelines, and reports of government meetings at national,
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