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**Report On The Proposed Sanctuary Zone and the Implications on the
Local Bajau Community in Sampela**

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Background

Operation Wallacea and the National Park Authorities have put forward a proposal to close off two areas of reef around Hoga for conservation purposes. One area is approximately 400 metres off the beach at Hoga – between Hoga and Sampela, and the other smaller area is off the outer pinnacle at the north of the island.

The idea behind the establishment of these sanctuary zones is to protect the reefs and increase fish stocks in the areas, thereby replenishing adjacent areas. The reefs will be used for purely diving and research purposes, and as a result, all fishing activity will be restricted in these areas.

Aims

The aim of this project was to assess the extent of support for the sanctuary zone by the Bajau community in Sampela. As the Bajau are fully dependent on fishing for income and food it was important to understand their opinions and perceptions of the sanctuary zone. The project aimed to explore any alternatives put forward by the Bajau community and any reasons for and against the success of the zone.

Methodology

In order to carry out this project it was essential to live and work with the Bajau community in Sampela. As the Bajau's lifestyle is embedded in tradition it was vital to live with the community to understand their perceptions and viewpoints.

The main method of research was semi-structured interviews with the community. Initially a structured questionnaire was used but it immediately became apparent that it was inappropriate. The interviews were conducted via a Bajau translator who lived in the village and worked closely with the community.

The interviews covered both village heads and local fishermen. It was important to interview village heads, including the village leader – Ili, as many were present at a meeting held at Hoga to discuss the proposal of the sanctuary zone. This group of people had most knowledge on the subject so therefore had their own valid ideas and opinions.

Fifteen net fishermen from the village were also interviewed. The project focused on net fishermen in particular as their livelihoods are most likely to be impacted by the implementation of the sanctuary zone, as it is the most widely used fishing method in Sampela. The interviews covered issues including fishing locations, levels of fish stocks, any declines in fish stocks and reasons for any such declines. Through trial and error this was found to be the most effective process of introducing the concept of the sanctuary zone to them, as the majority of the men interviewed had never heard of the proposal, or even the concept of a sanctuary zone.

In addition to interviewing the Bajau community it was essential to interview Tim Coles about his plans and proposals regarding the sanctuary zone. This was important to gain background information about the proposals and also important to put forward an even balance of opinions.

Results

Many points and ideas emerged through these interviews, both with the Bajau community and Operation Wallacea. After spending a considerable amount of time in Sampela it became clear that the sanctuary zone, in its current form, may not be accepted by the Bajau and may therefore be unsuccessful. There are many reasons for this:

- Although the Bajau can identify that fish stocks are declining, and will probably continue to, they do not currently see it as a problem. They understand that there are more nets now than there used to be but they are still catching fish and the market price has not fallen so their income is the same. If they do not see that there is a problem then it is hard to put forward a solution – such as a sanctuary zone.
- Closely related to the last point and equally important is the fact that the Bajau live and work on a day-to-day basis. They do not think in the long-term because they have never had to. As the whole concept of a sanctuary zone is conservation in the long-term it was foreign to them. The Bajau fish when they need to and where their instincts tell them, their whole lifestyle is based on tradition. This coupled with the fact that they have never had experience of anything like a sanctuary zone made it hard to discuss the idea with them. Very few people interviewed had any idea what a sanctuary zone was and it often took several attempts to explain it.
- Finally, the Bajau are strong believers in spirits and they do not believe that their daily catches are based on fluctuations in fish stocks, but rather down to their animistic beliefs. This part of the research is fairly vague at present and more work is being undertaken to clarify these issues.

Although there are many reasons why the sanctuary zone, in its present form, may be unsuccessful, there are alternatives that could be more favourable. The Bajau are conservation-minded in the sense that there is unanimous community opposition to the use of destructive fishing techniques such as bombing, cyanide and the use of compressors. Therefore the idea of conserving an area to increase fish stocks is not completely alien to them, as long as it is put forward in a way that relates to their traditional practices and beliefs.

Conclusions

Many conclusions can be drawn from this project, but more importantly many proposals can be put forward. There is no reason to believe that any form of conservation zone would be unsuccessful, but it would also be unrealistic to assume that it can be done in a matter of months.

For any zone to be successful, community support and participation from the start is absolutely essential. This project has shown that the Bajau community have their own perceptions of conservation based on their existing fishing practices and extensive knowledge. The Bajau community should therefore be allowed to devise their own proposals through a series of informal meetings in the community, with minimal outside involvement.

A sufficient amount of time is needed to allow village heads to introduce the idea to the rest of the village and for them to come up with a proposal that suits all. For any form of sanctuary zone to be successful the Bajau should have ownership of the idea and be responsible for its management. If the zone is imposed on them from outside it would most likely be unsuccessful from the start.

