

BETWEEN A CORAL REEF AND A HARD PLACE: THE POLITICS OF COASTAL MANAGEMENT IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses political participation problems associated with environmental intervention in the Third World, and specifically explores policy discourse behind Sri Lanka's internationally backed coastal management program. I examine the close relationship between environmental policy and national development strategies and argue that despite highly publicized participatory democracy discourse coastal management policy, particularly the recent "Special Area Management Planning" (SAMP) initiative, the policies favor enclosure of resources for ecotourism development and systematically disenfranchises competing resource interests. Community disillusionment with questionably democratic politics is fueling countermovements - signalling inherent weaknesses in SAMP as applied in Sri Lanka and environmental interventions throughout the Third World.*

INTRODUCTION

The prevailing view of international environmental interventions depicts conservation and development agencies as global biodiversity footsoldiers providing necessary utilitarian protection services in inappropriately developed thus precarious Third World ecozones (UNCED, 1993). While, indeed *because* environmental degradation is a serious issue that threatens the livelihoods and survival of many communities and should not be trivialized, this prevailing depiction of the merits of environmental interventions has been subject to many recent critical inspections. Some analyses of intervention projects have suggested that they can serve as a cover for specific development interests and because of their generally intense local focus have unprecedented ability to manipulate socio-political and spatial relationships (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990; Neumann, 1995; Schroeder, 1995; Wije, 1990). Ferguson's (1990) study of the expansive development agency conglomerate in Lesotho, is mirrored in different contexts by Peluso (1993) and Rich (1994), who show how international funding agencies can project a-political discourses yet align with political actors who support ecologically and socially oppressive development ideologies. Leach and Fairhead (1994) further

observe that interventionists can create erroneous interpretations of degradation to serve their interests in sustaining demand for their services. This distortion of knowledge can have enduring negative effects if it diverts attention from the true origins and gravity of environmental and socio-political issues (Watts, 1989).

The social, economic and ecological dilemmas faced by many small coastal communities in southwest Sri Lanka are largely the product of environmental degradation and environmental intervention processes as both originate from the same political-economic apparatus (Premaratne, 1991; Tampoe, 1988). Much degradation - coastal erosion, pollution, and species loss - can be attributed to the national economic development strategies pursued since liberalization in 1978, particularly an emphasis on coastal industry and tourism development (Tampoe, 1988). Rather than providing a forum for alternative visions of coastal development or alternatives *to* development, the environmental intervention structure implemented to solve degradation problems is largely an extension of central government economic agendas (Wije, 1990). The coastal management policy framework born in the late 1980s and early 1990s out of the joint US Agency for International Development (USAID)/Sri Lanka Coast Conservation Department (CCD), Coastal

Resources Management Project (CRMP), engages a discourse of sustainable development, particularly sustainable eco-tourism development, that some critics suggest may be inherently unattainable (Miller and Auyong, 1991; Selin, 1994). This paper scrutinizes the implications of the new coastal zone policy tool known as "Special Area Management Planning" (SAMP) for the southwest coast resort town of Hikkaduwa. It focuses on the institutionalization of a discourse that has disenfranchised some groups and strongly dictated the town's spatial, environmental, and economic dynamics.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT

Sri Lanka is an island nation that is heavily dependent on the health and availability of coastal resources. Most of the 18 million inhabitants and almost all of the major transportation and industrial infrastructure are concentrated along the coast of this former British colony. Sri Lanka also has a national economy with a growing dependence upon tourism as a means of relieving substantial international debt. In 1992 tourism accounted for 8% of the total foreign exchange earnings, third after industrial and "major" (agricultural) products (Tantrigama, 1994). Since independence in 1948, most tourism development has concentrated along the west and southwest coasts, and the capacity to house visitors has doubled since 1982 (CRMP, 1992). In light of the economic importance of coastal development such as tourism, industry and urban infrastructure, problems of erosion, ecosystem health and resource availability, have been subjects of concern since the 1970s.

In the late 1970s this concern escalated into a call for a formal coastal resource management body and created a space for increased environmental intervention by foreign development agencies, most notably USAID. In conjunction with US and other Western agencies, initial efforts of the nascent Sri Lanka Coast Conservation Department (CCD) continued a previous strategy of technological mitigation of coastal erosion in

defense of established shoreline structures. Investment embraced a network of groynes, seawalls, and breakwaters, creating a financial and geomorphological nightmare (Wije et al., 1993) In response, the 1980s witnessed what might be termed a paradigm shift as it became clear that shoreline fortification was short-term, cost prohibitive, and far from a utilitarian erosion solution or holistic management approach.

The question that launches this paper's analysis is whether Sri Lanka's new coastal management strategy of Special Area Management Planning (SAMP) is progressive and engaging of local-level participation in planning from beginning to end as suggested by the project literature; or simply a revised discourse that continues to exclude community participation at crucial points in the planning process and therefore continues to exacerbate resource conflicts and ecological problems. Preliminary observations made during a recent visit to Hikkaduwa suggest that the SAMP model, which is built on the "protected area" blueprint of prominent conservation and development agencies (c.f. Wells and Brandon, 1993), may be an inadvertent ecoprosecting tool that serves to conserve biodiversity for tourists and others who can afford to consume it at the expense of broader popular use and the survival of traditional livelihoods. These possibilities must be further explored in the Hikkaduwa arena as this is a test site for broader Third World SAMP implementation.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF COASTAL STABILIZATION

Driving Interests Behind Coastal Stabilization Policy

Near-shore areas in Sri Lanka are highly utilized public spaces. A profile of a beachfront community on the west or southwest coast might include people waiting for the train, railside squatters, fishermen unfurling their nets to dry, shell, coral and batik hawkers, people collecting coral and shells, local men and tourists swimming, hotels and guest houses, restaurants, and so on.

Most parties are somehow connected to the coastal tourism industry, their presence reflecting two decades of sporadic growth within the industry. It is consistent that two decades of coastal stabilization policies formulated by external aid agencies and the CCD also reflect dominant economic interests.

Between 1978 (the commencement of formal economic liberalization) and 1987, expenditures on coastal fortification structures to "protect" against erosion increased by a factor of eleven, despite the growing national awareness of the physical limitations of this strategy (Sri Lanka CCD, 1990). Clearly, tourism development played a strong role in influencing this program because of its importance as a foreign exchange earner. Such an extensive demand for structural fortification is by some accounts attributable to a pattern of locating resorts on the immediate shoreline (Tampoe, 1988; Wijie et al., 1993). The existence of immobile structures upon an inherently dynamic beach exacerbates long term erosion problems by interfering with sand transfer processes. The strong wave action of the Indian Ocean and sea level rise have certainly contributed to erosion, but the presence of edifices in a geomorphologically active zone is a more important contributor to localized erosion and thus the demand for protection (Wijie et al., 1993). Although the embrace of coastal fortification is loosened in new generations of "post-structural" coastal policy and nearshore developments are regulated by the Coastal Erosion Management Plan (Sri Lanka CCD, 1986), allowances have been made for construction in new tourism spots along the southern coast.

Coastal protection structure expansion is only one of several coastal stabilization policies implemented to protect tourism development. Resource conservation projects are another important component that emerged in the 1980s and have consolidated in the 1990s coincident with the rise in tourism and, particularly eco-tourism. Ideally, coastal eco-tourism demands a beach and an environmental preservation strategy designed to protect valuable amenity resources, such as coral reefs, shells, and tropical fish. The question is, protection from whom? From those who engage in the centuries-old practices of sand and coral extraction for conversion into construction materials, and from those who mine tropical fish to feed the accelerating export demand (CRMP, 1992). The

eco-tourism demands for a "stable" beach and a steady supply of amenity resources have merged to influence both a policy definition of coastal degradation and a vision of appropriate solutions. As the following discourse analysis reveals, the evolution of this coastal stabilization framework has been achieved through the selective emphasis of degradation causes.

Discursive Framing of Coastal Degradation and Repair

The language of post-structural coastal resource management policy, particularly the most recent SAMP policy, appears to have been constructed by the CRMP team to convey a clear sense of who is responsible for environmental degradation and of the optimal solutions to the problem. Ultimately policy documents reflect the following unstated goals: i) Diversion of blame for coastal problems (i.e., erosion, pollution and resource extraction) away from critical national economic interests, particularly tourism; ii) Provision for continued structural protection for tourism facilities and other economic development infrastructure; and iii) Removal of resource conflicts or interference with dominant development interest(s), while maintaining broader public legitimacy.

The post-structural policy-making process has evolved over the past ten years and has involved extensive input by a dynamic international apparatus, most visibly the USAID advisory team from the University of Rhode Island Coastal Resources Center. Although the Coast Conservation Department is the Sri Lankan national management body through which policies have been formally expressed, it does not appear to have been as influential in orienting the discourse as the foreign consultants who have initiated much of the policy. Created in concept by the Coast Conservation Act of 1981, and physically established a few years later, the CCD remains a small unit today, maintaining a planning staff of a few individuals and, possessing little power to express views contradictory to national economic agendas or the international agencies which facilitate them. The objectives laid out above, and associated discourse, should then be considered the voice of the larger CRMP apparatus.

The Politics of Coastal Management in Sri Lanka

Evidence of how stabilization policy discourse fulfills the three underlying objectives identified above is apparent in primary policy sources such as the de facto master policy for coastal zone management, *Coastal 2000* (CRMP, 1992), and supporting documents. In the interest of manageability, the analysis language primarily considers the construction of causes and solutions to beach erosion rather than to the broad range of environmental degradation issues in the coastal zone. The following quote appears to be an objective depiction of the sources of coastal erosion:

"Coastal erosion is a severe problem in Sri Lanka that results in damage to or loss of houses, hotels and other coastal structures...contributes to the loss or degradation of valuable land and disrupts fishing, shipping and other activities....Coastal erosion ...results from the natural action of waves and currents and from a variety of human activities and most notably ill-designed coastal structures, the construction of hotels and other buildings too near the shoreline, and sand and coral mining..." (Lowry and Wickremeratne, 1987, 9-10).

There are several key implications of this quote. First, it suggests continued use (albeit modified) of hard engineering structures, precluding consideration of land use modifications or retreat as a response to erosion. The de-stabilizing effect of these structures is explained as a consequence of "ill design," an explanation that trivializes a fundamental question of whether humans should interfere with dynamic coastal geomorphology. Second, the passage appears to objectively define the causes of coastal erosion, including criticism of a variety of activities. However, a bias is apparent in the space allocated in the Lowry and Wickremeratne report to discussion of these causes. The role of "ill-designed" structures, coral/sand extraction, and hotel location, takes up three, five, and less than one paragraph respectively. In short, this passage and subsequent paragraphs succeed in continuing to promote expensive "better designed" structural fortification and in directing negative attention toward approximately 10,000 people who are engaged in some aspect of coral and sand processing. Finally, and most importantly, the discourse downplays the effect of hotels and other shoreline tourism-related facilities in creating and exacerbating erosion through interference with sediment transport (Premaratne, 1991; Wijesinghe et al., 1993). In essence, the discourse frames a degradation problem that

coincides with the objectives outlined above, setting the stage for a solution involving disenfranchisement of local industries that compete with dominant tourism interests for space and resources.

In fitting the erosion solution to the problem, the CRMP policy body mandates a campaign against the subjects of disproportionate blame. Under the final heading "Major Issues and Opportunities to be Addressed in the Coastal Region," *Coastal 2000* presents a final vision of coastal development, including an essential statement about the overall degradation problem. The solution:

"is a combination of restrictions and incentives that promote the improvement of local economies through appropriate industrial development and the promotion of tourism" (CRMP, 1992, 53).

This vision is supported by a full page color close-up of a partially clad, grinning coral miner hauling away a basket of dead coral fingers and branches. The photo caption reads:

"Coral mining has been difficult to stop because it provides a lucrative livelihood for some coastal inhabitants" (CRMP, 1992, 52).

implying, perhaps, that an element of greed is involved in the pursuit of a non-utilitarian activity. This visual and caption captures the ongoing bias against certain economic activities - livelihoods that have already endured ten years of zoning restrictions, illegalization and other oppressive tactics at the hands of the CCD/CRMP (Premaratne, 1991).

Resistance to repressive resource control measures threatened the legitimacy of the CCD in the mid-to late-1980s, forcing the CRMP team to add an element of participatory democracy discourse to the rational-technical jargon of policy documents (Premaratne, 1991). A prospectus document introducing the newest coastal management strategy (Special Area Management Planning) reads:

"Resource management programs succeed when people affected feel they have been empowered to exert some control over their environment. Public education and local participation in the formulation of management strategies are therefore keystones for any integrated resource management process" (AID/URI, 1987, 4).

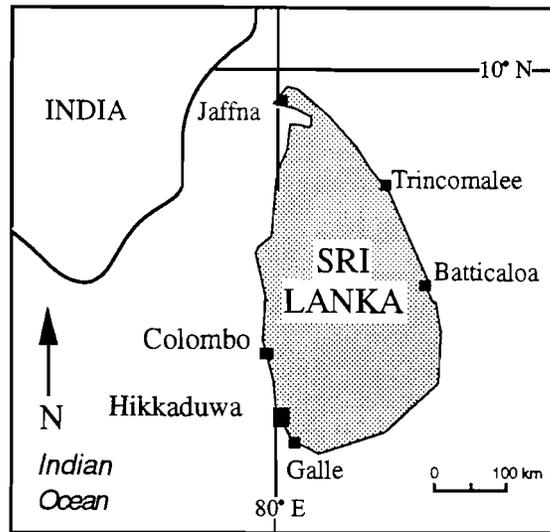


Figure 1. Hikkaduwa, Sri Lanka

This language reflects a broader tendency in recent international development discourse to embrace public input in "sustainable development" projects (Wells and Brandon, 1992). Just as the agendas of this literature have been questioned (c.f. Sachs, 1993), so too should those of SAMP to ascertain whether the model is truly democratic or simply a refined development advocacy tool. Analysis of one of two Sri Lankan SAMP projects approaches an answer.

Rhetorical Participation: SAMP in Hikkaduwa

In 1993 CRMP introduced "Special Area Management Planning" (SAMP) in the resort town of Hikkaduwa. Conceptually, SAMP purports to be a democratic process of resource management that will ensure relative success in environmental protection by concentrating upon small, well-defined geographical units. According to the model's principles, local parties with interests in the zone, including previously disenfranchised individuals, would become empowered to decide how resources and space should be utilized. In theory, the process should reduce environmentally destructive activities and fairly mediate resource conflicts. However, after the first two years of the Hikkaduwa pilot project it has become apparent that model rhetoric is contradicted by fundamentally inequitable aspects of the policy-making process. Discussions

with project consultants and community members has revealed the perception that basic agenda-setting has been pre-established by upper-level policy-makers long before local individuals enter the decision-making process. This ordering of party involvement essentially determines SAMP objectives and restricts levels of public empowerment. Further analysis reveals questionable aspects of this protected area model.

Hikkaduwa is located about 100 km south of the capital city, Colombo (Figure 1). It is one of the oldest tourism resorts in the country and is severely affected by pollution and coastal erosion (Nakatani et al., 1994; Tampoe, 1988). Most waterfront hotels have virtually no remaining beach and almost daily, wave action contributes to the incremental undermining of the town's main road (and principle national highway) which is "protected" by a mosaic of beach and offshore structures. The community faces serious ecological problems and a declining tourism economy (Seneviratne, 1993). Those resources that remain, including some beach area, a declining fish population, and a coral reef complex, are the focus of intense conflict as hoteliers, fishermen, coral and shell miners, tropical fish miners and others stake their claims. SAMP has played a critical role in determining how remaining space and resources are allocated and, therefore, who prospers.

The Politics of Coastal Management in Sri Lanka

A small coral reef sanctuary, recently established and maintained under the jurisdiction of the Sri Lanka Department of Wildlife Conservation (with the CCD playing a coordinating role) now doubles as the focal point of the approximately 405 ha (1000 acre) SAMP zone (Nakatani et al., 1994). As established by CRMP officials, the main objective at this approximately 50 ha sanctuary is to conserve ecological and physical amenities, including sand, ornamental and edible fish, open space, and, most notably, coral reefs, which serve both as a natural erosion barrier and as an attraction for snorkelers and other eco-minded tourists (Tantrigama and White, 1994). Although the sanctuary is divided into several use zones, the restrictive size of the most flexible use zone, which is about one third of the total area, inhibits any significant use of space or resources for non-tourism endeavors, such as traditional fishing activities. The fact that the pre-set objective of the project precludes previously acceptable resource uses (i.e. anchoring fishing boats, and collecting shells, sand, and washed up coral for sale or construction materials), many of which were necessary to community livelihoods prior to sanctuary establishment, is a sore point in the process. Indeed, in defiance of SAMP zoning, area fishermen continue to anchor their boats in the vicinity of fragile coral reefs because, according to interviews with local individuals and a former CRMP consultant, they feel they have no acceptable alternative (Samarakoon, 1994).

An additional point of contention is the administration of the site by two coastal planners associated with the Colombo office of the Coastal Resources Management Project. While the "outsider" character of these planners has appeared to affect their legitimacy, their actions have undermined it (Samarakoon, 1994). Interviews with local individuals engaged in tourist services within the SAMP zone revealed the perception that site CRMP officials are undependable, frequently not in their beachfront office or otherwise available to the public, and delinquent in monitoring the continuing discharge of hotel sewage into the sanctuary. More importantly, they are perceived as corrupt, based on knowledge of their frequent friendly associations with large hotel interests. Since top level CRMP officials rarely visit Hikkaduwa they have little knowledge of or influence over local politics. In

short then, many who work closely within the SAMP framework have expressed a feeling that this model enables economic favoritism and fails to serve broad community interests.

In response to SAMP's ineffectiveness in carrying out the participatory democracy featured in policy discourse some local individuals have taken it upon themselves to monitor hotel sewage and chlorinated water discharge (important factors in coral reef decline), and explicit coral and tropical fish mining. Interestingly, fishermen who illegally anchor boats in the sanctuary and damage shallow reefs are not perceived antagonistically, rather they are considered victims of a tourism development that has monopolized the shore (Samarakoon, 1994). Tourism interests, particularly large hotels (as opposed to family-run guest houses), are perceived as carelessly destructive of the ecosystem upon which the community depends.

It is apparent that many locals, particularly families that run informal (unregistered) guest houses (accounting for 88 % of all guest house rooms in Hikkaduwa) and those who sell food, souvenirs, and incidental services to tourists, are dependent upon the industry for income (Nakatani et al., 1994). Therefore, they have some interest in the SAMP discourse which urges conservation of resources for tourism uses. However, their concern for the ecological health of the sanctuary and the broader environment differs in a distinct temporal sense from that of the large hotel and the "formal" guest house investors, at least 50% of whom are from Colombo or are internationally based (Tantrigama and White, 1994). Most locals have a long-term investment in the quality of the coastal environment. Livelihoods and survival are dependent on the health of the beach, habitat, and other resources that will continue to provide food and employment in the event of tourism's decline. Historical data and recent anecdotal evidence suggest that the reduction in water quality and fish supplies associated with two decades of tourism has in fact resulted in increased malnutrition, and disease in the fishing settlement located behind the tourism complex (Sri Lanka National Science Council, 1978). Clearly, while many hoteliers may be interested in conservation of amenity resources to attract tourists, this interest does not match the need to sustain immediate profits by externalizing environmental costs such as sewage that are

detrimental to long-term community health.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Fundamental distinctions remain in the social and ecological interests of actors engaged in different sub-sectors of the tourism industry. These interests result from geographic and economic positioning. Large-scale tourism, which entered Hikkaduwa in the 1960s, brought small-scale trades into a dependency relationship, thus their interests *appear* to coincide. However, tourism development is generally conceptualized by investors outside of localities and uses localities to serve outsiders. Most importantly, large-scale tourism interests are mobile, rendering the locality a short-term venture in the event that environmental conditions for profit decline, whereas small scale tourism-related trades are situated permanently in their locales. Rather than seriously confronting this divergence of interests in eco-tourism development, protected area-style coastal management policies can serve to extend tourism ventures until, ultimately, industrial externalities like sewage discharge overcome environmental quality prompting mobile interests to migrate (Miller and Auyong, 1991). In Sri Lanka this phenomenon is apparent (c.f. Seneviratne, 1993) and the economic, and ecological implications of continuing SAMP eco-tourism/conservation discourse appear to be negative for those positioned permanently in resort areas. Two trends support this conclusion. First, many hotels in Hikkaduwa and other seasoned tourism areas (Mt Lavinia and Negombo) are losing business due to continuing erosion and pollution (Tantrigama and White, 1994). Hotel investors have begun moving to relatively unexploited locations, and while some dependent service sectors have tried to migrate, most have remained behind in deteriorated places. Second, eco-tourism projects supported by international development agencies have extended into the nature-park niche. This manifests the same exclusionary tendencies of de-facto land privatization that are embedded in coastal SAMP (Neumann, 1995).

It is necessary to underscore a fundamental point at this stage of analysis: policy discourse

emanating from conservation and development agencies involved in Sri Lankan coastal management is an expression of sustainable development-style modernization ideology and, therefore, necessarily discounts historical realities. Advocacy of eco-tourism overrides previous land tenure and resource-use patterns in the coastal zone (Sri Lankan National Science Council, 1978). This is achieved in coastal policy literature through the creation of a *problematique*, erosion for example, and the formulation of a solution that scapegoats and disenfranchises (both politically and spatially) those who compete with the new economic scheme of tourism. It appears from preliminary observations that SAMP is the mechanism that promotes this agenda and does so through presetting land use schemes and otherwise marginalizing competitive interests. Indeed, it may be more effective than previous mechanisms because the model is founded on a participatory democracy discourse that has gained international political legitimacy. Any realization of more equitable and perhaps more ecologically sound resource uses may require a reconsideration of both the SAMP agenda and decision-making dynamics.

Not surprisingly, in Hikkaduwa where SAMP has paradoxically prompted awareness of political disenfranchisement, there are signs of political autonomy and anti-development movements. As advocated by outspoken Sri Lankan social scientists who promote actualized local participation in policy-making (c.f. Premaratne, 1991; Seneviratne, 1993; Wije, 1990), some local community groups disenfranchised from SAMP have taken to alternative civic spaces in support of coastal resource uses that confront the tourism hegemony. The civil disobedience of area fishermen who anchor their boats in the sanctuary restricted zones is one such example. Whether alternatives to sustainable development discourse survive and to what extent they either adapt or reject the current SAMP institutional framework is the subject of continuing research. Clearly, the impact of over a decade of top-down international environmental intervention upon local political and socioeconomic dynamics cannot be erased. Nonetheless, the significant discrediting of the sustainable development paradigm and the ongoing departure of foreign environmental interventionists from the SAMP project may allow the re-emergence of more

diverse voices in coastal resource management.

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