

Beyond “Success”: Community, Governance, and the Future of Cabo Pulmo National Park

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This paper uses Cabo Pulmo National Park (CPNP) as a case study to examine the successes and challenges of Marine Protected Area (MPA) design, conception, and long-term governance. Drawing from literature in environmental anthropology, political ecology, and conservation, the author argues for a renewed examination of the ‘success’ of CPNP that pays greater attention to the relationship between socio-political factors (e.g. access, ownership, participation, and rights) and protected area governance. Ultimately, the paper calls for a reconsideration of Marine Protected Area design and implementation that explicitly acknowledges the politics of conservation and protected area management, and seeks to explicitly create and support more effective platforms for participation and conflict resolution.

Key words: Community, governance, Cabo Pulmo, Baja California Sur, Mexico

Introduction

In January 2017 I took a cross-country flight on United Airlines. I noticed the in-flight magazine happened to have a cover story called “Three Perfect Days” that focused on tourism in Los Cabos, Baja California Sur, Mexico. I opened its glossy pages to have a look. The third ‘perfect day’ of the story recounts a trip to Cabo Pulmo, where I have conducted research since 2009. The author describes Cabo Pulmo and its national park as “the closest to paradise as I’ll ever get” (Stein 2017:64). This article is part of a trend: Cabo Pulmo is getting considerable attention and quickly becoming a symbol of successful marine conservation and sustainable tourism. The Cabo Pulmo National Park (CPNP) also appears in the September 2017 edition of *National Geographic* in a piece titled “Stewards of the Sea” (Vance 2017). In this piece, Cabo Pulmo is described as an exemplar of the trust that is necessary to create and maintain effective environmental conservation. In the 2016

film “Mission Blue,” the well-known marine biologist and environmental advocate Silvia Earle named the Gulf of California one of her “hope spots,” citing Cabo Pulmo as a model for marine conservation and community engagement.

Indeed, Earle (2015: para. 21) has called the efforts in Cabo Pulmo “a source of inspiration and hope, not just nationally but internationally and globally.” As these examples demonstrate, Cabo Pulmo National Park (CPNP) has garnered extensive attention, in academia and the popular media, as a conservation success story (see also Gámez 2008; Aburto-Oropeza et al. 2011). It is considered a success according to both biological and social measures: the MPA has seen significant recovery of biomass (Aburto-Oropeza et al. 2011) and demonstrable community engagement and participation, along with extensive socio-political support (and media attention) at the local, national, and international levels. Cabo Pulmo has achieved a kind of symbolic power in the world of marine conservation.

Despite the undeniable progress that has been achieved in CPNP since its inception, the park still faces considerable challenges and shortcomings that threaten its long-term viability. These problems are primarily social and political in nature. One of the foundational problems is a matter of governance: The park is underfunded, understaffed, and has very limited on-the-ground enforcement and monitoring. This translates into a situation in which much of the actual support for the park—including enforcement of rules—falls on the shoulders of the community. But the community has not been sufficiently empowered to undertake this task. Disputes over rules, rights, and sanctions are commonplace. This situation has been ongoing since the park’s inception. These issues of governance are exacerbated by several other factors, including ongoing disputes over land ownership, a lack of basic

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municipal services (e.g., schools, clinics, electricity), and long-term conflicts between Mexican residents and the non-Mexican, expatriate-settler population¹ (see Anderson 2014, 2015, 2017). These internal socio-political factors are further compounded by external development pressure, rising land values, and real estate speculation (Anderson 2017).

CPNP has been able to withstand many of these problems up until now, but as Cabo Pulmo's recognition increases—and more tourists find their way to its shores—the park may be more difficult to maintain. Increasing flows of visitors will likely put stress on existing socio-political factors that already pose challenges for the park and the community of Cabo Pulmo. I argue that CPNP—and protected areas as a whole—should be critically reevaluated and restructured in a way that addresses issues of both biodiversity conservation and social sustainability (see West and Brockington 2006; Rife et al. 2012). This was, after all, one of the founding goals of the park (Anaya and Arizpe 1998; CONANP 2009).

At present, despite its relative successes, CPNP remains a weakly governed protected area with minimal enforcement of rules and regulations. While there have been considerable improvements, the problems of poaching and other illegal activities remain. Outside threats, such as widespread tourism and residential development, further complicate the situation. The management plan for CPNP was designed via a framework that focused primarily on biological and ecological factors. While social factors were considered, this attention was insufficient. And yet, as Mascia (2003:630) argues, “social factors, not biological or physical variables, are the primary determinants of MPA success or failure.” Ultimately, the future of CPNP likely rests on the ability of all involved parties (including state and federal government agencies in Mexico) to create and support a governance structure that effectively addresses the complications, conflicts, and politics of human social arrangements.

Numerous researchers argue for the need to focus on the biological *and* the social dimensions of protected areas and MPAs (e.g., Fiske 1992; Stonich 2003; Blount and Pitchon 2007; Jentoft et al. 2011; McCay and Jones 2011; Fox et al. 2012; West and Brockington 2006; Rife et al. 2012). The challenge, however, is moving from these broad calls for action toward actual implementation in specific protected areas. The imperative questions—and Cabo Pulmo is a case in point—revolve around who benefits from these protected areas, who has access to them, and who has the power to shape their futures. Drawing upon perspectives in environmental anthropology and political ecology, this paper critically examines the ‘success’ of Cabo Pulmo National Park, arguing that protected area planning and management must be re-conceptualized to adequately account for 1) the uneven politics of conservation (see West 2016; Brockington et al. 2007); and 2) a need for governance structures that effectively address conflict and disputes (rather than assuming or hoping for harmonious community-based management). I return to these points at the end of the paper.

Methods and Literature Review

The protected area in Cabo Pulmo was initially designated as a marine park in 1995, and then modified to a national park in 2000 (Weiant 2005:102-103; CONANP-UABCS 2006). CPNP consists of 7,111 hectares, 99 percent of which is located in the marine zone. The original management plan stipulated a 35 percent no-take zone. The settlement of Cabo Pulmo, located in the state of Baja California Sur, Mexico, has a relatively small resident population. Official estimates from Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) range from fifty-eight in 2005 to fifty in 2010 (INEGI 2005, 2010). During an informal survey in 2011, a community-based NGO in Cabo Pulmo estimated that eighty-eight Mexican citizens lived in the community (see Anderson 2014). These numbers do not account for the expatriate population and may underestimate the local Mexican population as well. Including Mexican residents and American, Canadian, and other expats, Cabo Pulmo has approximately 200-250 residents.²

This paper is based upon research conducted between 2009 and 2018. This research included two summers of preliminary fieldwork (2009 and 2010), one year of ethnographic research (2011-2012), and five follow-up visits (between 2013 and 2018). I conducted a total of forty-two formal and one hundred informal interviews during fieldwork, in addition to participant observation with two local organizations that focused on development and park-related issues. My interviews in 2012 focused on Mexican and expat residents' histories in Cabo Pulmo, their perspectives about development, and, finally, their experiences with and opinions about the National Park. During all of these interviews, the National Park was a key focal point that residents talked about as they shared their experiences and memories of life in Cabo Pulmo.

The National Park has dramatically shaped life in Cabo Pulmo, just as it has shaped the community's image for outsiders and visitors. Cabo Pulmo is often cited as a positive example of community-based conservation. Many media portrayals tend to uncritically characterize Cabo Pulmo as a kind of eco-paradise that has managed to avoid the pitfalls of mass tourism through locally-based change. But the story of Cabo Pulmo fits within a much broader narrative about protected area management that tends to revolve around the problem of governance, specifically: 1) who can or should participate in the governance structure and process?; and 2) what is the appropriate scale of governance? This debate in conservation and resource management brings us back to questions asked by Hardin (1968), who assumed that the management of common resources could not avoid overexploitation, and therefore required top-down authority and control. Anthropologists, political scientists, and other social scientists have pushed back on Hardin's conclusions for decades with strong evidence that communities around the world can successfully manage common pool resources (e.g., McCay and Acheson 1996; Ostrom et al. 1999). However, during the 1990s in particular, community-based models became a sort of panacea approach to conservation and resource management (see West et al. 2006).

While community-based models and approaches gained wide acceptance and inspired hope for rethinking

human-nature relationships, they also ran aground amid their own shortcomings and assumptions. In essence, the concept of ‘community,’ as it was often deployed, was far too utopian and oversimplified to enact much significant change. Like the grand abstraction of ‘humanity,’ the whole idea of the uniform, harmonious community that can solve all problems is largely a fiction of the academic and conservationist imaginary (see Leach et al. 1999). This “mythic community,” as Agrawal and Gibson called it, “fails to attend to differences within communities” (1999:640). Reliance on such myths, particularly in management plans, results in governance structures that simply cannot function in the real world of human behavior, power struggles, and politics. Too often, approaches to protected area governance tend to avoid deeper, difficult questions about power, equality, authority, rights, and inclusion (see Peterson 2011; Young 1999; Durand et al. 2012; Haenn 2005). This, I argue, is what has happened with CPNP. In essence, community-based approaches that do not account for questions of difference and power ultimately abdicate on these issues, forfeiting any possibility of addressing the kinds of human-environment conflicts that loom over so many destinations around the world. This paper uses the case of Cabo Pulmo—which is often lauded as an exemplary model for conservation—to tackle these questions head on in the search for alternative possibilities.

The Makings of a Marine Park

Between 1985 and 1995, there was a peak of protected area creation around the world (West and Brockington 2006:252). During the 1990s, in the midst of this proliferation of protected areas, Mexico’s national environmental policy underwent considerable transformation (Havard et al. 2015:117; García-Frapolli et al. 2009; Gil Corrales 2007). This reorganization included a national shift toward more overt protection of marine resources and biodiversity (Havard et al. 2015:117). Cabo Pulmo was part of this wave of conservation and environmental protection.

The drive to create Cabo Pulmo’s MPA began in the early 1980s (Anaya and Arizpe 1998; Weiant 2005; Cariño et al. 2008). Since as early as the 1950s, residents of Cabo Pulmo had survived via small-scale artisanal fishing, supplemented with some ranching and agriculture (Cariño et al. 2008). The human impacts on local fisheries were minimal during these years (Cariño et al. 2008:86). By the 1960s, however, due in large part to overfishing from large commercial fleets and a growing sportfishing economy, local fisheries began to show signs of degradation. In the 1980s and early 1990s, residents from Cabo Pulmo worked with scientists and scholars, many from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California Sur (UABCS), to initiate the creation of a protected area (CONANP 2006; Cariño et al. 2008; Anaya and Arizpe 1998). The park was officially created in June 1995 by decree of the Federal government. No Federal funds were set aside for this protected area when it was first created (Weiant 2005:102). Community involvement to help manage the park, as Anaya and Arizpe explain, was a primary focus from the beginning:

To have local residents as the main supporters of the conservation efforts for the coral reef has been the main component of the management strategy. The attainment of this goal was facilitated by a long, committed and interactive relationship between the scientific community of the region and the local inhabitants. As a result, the first phase of the management strategy has been characterized by a highly participatory planning process, [which] led to the establishment of the Marine Park and the appointment of a local resident as park director (Anaya and Arizpe 1998:233).

Despite these efforts to include community participation, CPNP has had a contentious history. Some residents—including both expatriates and local Mexican citizens—initially resisted the new protected area, in part because they felt it was being imposed by outside forces. During my interviews between 2009 and 2012, interviewees indicated that various members of the community specifically resisted and resented the park’s rules and restrictions. While there was support from local residents, this support was divided, inconsistent, and often contentious (see Weiant 2005:129-133). As one resident explained in an interview for a film, when his father, a founding member of the Mexican community, heard about the proposal for the park, he said “they can go to hell” (see Alvarez 2014).

While residents from Cabo Pulmo played a key role in pushing the idea forward, the process was not as broadly participatory as some hoped and expected. According to Weiant (2005), some residents complained about a lack of local involvement. One local Mexican family took a central, active role in establishing the park (see Weiant 2005; Cariño et al. 2008:87-88). In many ways, this family became a de facto stand-in for the community as a whole. They worked to help make the conservation of Cabo Pulmo a priority for the Mexican government. Members of this family “hosted government officials and academic researchers, shared local knowledge on marine resources, and acted as tour guides of the reef area” (Weiant 2005:129-130). As Weiant explains, and my interviews corroborated, few others beyond this family were consulted or have any memory of taking part in the creation of CPNP (2005:131). There are disputes, however, about who took part in this process and who can claim credit for the park. Many disputes manifested in the formation—and dissolution—of several community-based organizations.

The first community-based organization, the Patronato Cabo del Este, A.C., was founded in 1985 by US residents from Cabo Pulmo and Las Barracas, along with two local business owners (Weiant 2005:130). This group claims partial credit for helping to establish the park. The main priority of this Patronato was protecting the reef through the creation of a functioning park (Weiant 2005:130). After the park was established, the Patronato Cabo del Este helped the underfunded park and its first director, who was appointed in 1995-96. The Patronato also organized community meetings, helped police the park, raised funds, and tried to create management strategies for the fledgling park (Weiant 2005:130-131).

This organization eventually ran into problems, however. When the international NGO *The Nature Conservancy* (TNC) expressed an interest in working in Cabo Pulmo, it had reservations about partnering up with the Patronato Cabo del Este because of its largely non-Mexican membership (Weiant 2005:134). This was a key point of contention, not just for international NGOs, but for local Mexican residents who were concerned about losing their stake and voice in park governance to outsiders. One American expat I interviewed, who was a key member of this Patronato, expressed frustration with TNC's unwillingness to provide support. In response, many of the non-Mexican members resigned and were replaced by local, Mexican residents. The Patronato was renamed in 1997 as the "Patronato Cabo Pulmo Los Frailes Grupo Ecológico, A.C." (Weiant 2005:135). TNC was still reticent to provide support, however. This second Patronato eventually went dormant as well.

Despite some early positive signs, government support for the park was extremely limited during the first several years. There was little funding or infrastructure for the park, and it took years to draft and finally approve a management plan. The first park director was a controversial figure throughout the community, and was forced to resign about a year after he was appointed. As Weiant (2005:116) explains, with almost no funding, no director, and still no Management Plan, CPNP was effectively little more than a paper park for its first several years. Once again, local residents attempted to step in and fill the gaps.

It was during this time that another important organization was created. In 1997 the park's board was first created. This board, which was composed of local inhabitants,³ was created to "promote the continuance of the planning processes, and to ensure that a management plan will be made" (Anaya and Arizpe 1998:234). In the same year, the park's *Consejo Asesor*, or advisory council, was established. The *Consejo Asesor*, which was headed up by Oscar Arizpe from UABCS, included representatives from the local community, local businesses, and government agencies (Anaya and Arizpe 1998:234). This advisory council was established to help coordinate resources, develop the management plan, and secure funding. This council has managed to persist, but as Arizpe (personal communication, 2018) explains, it has very little power beyond advising. I will return to this council toward the end of this paper.

In 1999, yet another community organization, "Patronato Parque Marino Cabo Pulmo," was created. This organization was founded by expatriates, mostly from the U.S. According to Weiant (2005:133), this new group helped support the park through fundraising, creating park signs, publishing a park brochure, and organizing environmental education programs. But this Patronato also fell apart due to tension and distrust. Specifically, some residents were suspicious of this Patronato because of the ulterior motives of its members, who allegedly had a problematic relationship with both the Park Director and federal regulatory authorities (Weiant 2005:134).

Between 2000 and 2003, there was a period of local disengagement and disillusion about the park. As Weiant (2005:135) explains, by this time some residents of Cabo Pulmo felt "rejected and disrespected" when it came to the park. It was, for many, just another empty promise. The park had no plan, little funding, no director, and limited community support. Up until this point, the involvement of national and international NGOs was limited to the brief interest of TNC. But in 2003 several NGOs, including The Nature Conservancy, Pro Peninsula, Niparajá, and Wild Coast came into the picture. This resurgence also coincided with the formation of a new community organization that same year: Amigos para la Conservación de Cabo Pulmo (ACCP).

Ana, who was a resident in Cabo Pulmo during this period, remembers these events well. When she arrived in the early 2000s, CPNP had very little infrastructure and no signs, and there was "no way to know you were in the park." She remembers that people from both the Mexican and expat communities were still fishing on the reef at this time. According to Ana, even talking about the park was a taboo subject. She remembers that many people were "jaded" because of their experience with the first director and other government officials.

ACCP, Ana told me, was meant to be a bridge between the expat and Mexican sides of the community. "There was a need to create a community-based organization," she explained. "There had been several already. They came together and fell apart because of infighting." Ana attributes the failures of the earlier organizations to local politics and personal disputes. The charter for ACCP was signed by a diverse array of people, including Mexicans and expats. One of the primary goals, Ana explained, was to make everyone feel like they were part of the organization and move past existing conflicts and disagreements.

Unlike many of the other community-based organizations, ACCP has managed to survive. It has weathered conflict, in many ways, through consolidation. One of the key factors in the dissolution of the previous community-based organizations was conflict between local Mexican residents and expatriates. While ACCP has been a successful organization, it has also been both contentious and insular. It was first established, like the previous organizations, with participation from both Mexican residents and expats. Over time, however, ACCP became dominated by Mexican residents, primarily from one family. This is the same family that has become the face and voice of Cabo Pulmo in much of the media and scholarly literature. For members of this family, the move to consolidate ACCP was likely strategic, especially considering all of the previous conflicts, increasing expat migration, property ownership disputes, and growing interest in the park. Keeping it "in the family" may have been an attempt to maintain some form of local control and influence in a place that was rapidly changing. As more and more experts, visitors, and new residents came in from the outside, this family made a concerted effort to establish their rights and claims to this place, using the park as a locus of political leverage and solidarity.

The lack of a management plan—which was not published until 2009—may have exacerbated CPNP’s socio-political problems. As noted above, without a formal plan, multiple community groups were created over time in an attempt to fill that void. When the management plan was finally published, it did bring some clarity to the situation. Still, social tensions persisted. Many of these problems are reflected by the gaps and ambiguities in the management plan itself. The conceptualization of the plan reflects some of the deeper problems that were not addressed when the park was created. This includes the problematic way in which the management plan addresses questions of both community and stakeholder participation. While the plan has an exhaustive treatment of the dynamic nature of the CPNP’s biological resources, its attention of the human side of the equation is insufficient. In essence, while it provides extensive formal mechanisms for assessing and protecting the park’s biological resources, it provides few concrete, explicit avenues that outline rights and allow for meaningful participation of community members. This blind spot is perhaps CPNP’s biggest Achilles heel. Despite these issues, CPNP has still achieved undeniable social and environmental success.

Success: The Fame of Cabo Pulmo

Cabo Pulmo’s conservation success was a long time coming, and, as detailed above, the process was fraught with challenges. But CPNP did achieve measurable success. In 1999, Sala et al. (2002) conducted a widespread underwater visual survey of reefs in the Gulf of California. Ten years later, this study was replicated and subsequently published by Aburto-Oropeza et al. (2011). Both studies included extensive surveys of the reef systems at CPNP. Between 1999 and 2009, fish species richness, top predator diversity, and total fish biomass grew significantly, and *total biomass* in the reserve increased by 463 percent (Aburto-Oropeza et al. 2011). This tremendous recovery made global headlines and led researchers to declare Cabo Pulmo “the most robust marine preserve in the world.” (Scripps Institution of Oceanography 2011). The announcement of this dramatic recovery bolstered CPNP’s growing reputation as a globally-recognized model for marine conservation.

CPNP has thus far been a *social* (and political) success in many ways as well. Some scholars have attributed this success to broad community support, including effective local leadership, self-policing, and participation in the enforcement of the park’s rules and regulations (Harvard et al. 2015; Aburto-Oropeza et al. 2011:4). In particular, local residents’ decision to expand CPNP’s no-take zone, which was originally set at 35 percent, to nearly 100 percent of the park has been highlighted as a key factor that helped support biodiversity recovery (Aburto-Oropeza et al. 2011:2). The park has also generated economic benefits for local residents, from eco-tourism and dive businesses to restaurants and other tourism-related services (see Martinez de la Torre 2008).

CPNP has also become a powerful *symbol* for marine conservation. This is one of the key aspects of its social and political success. This stems in part from effective engagement with various media campaigns and a network of non-governmental organizations. Local organizations such as ACCP have been particularly adept at linking themselves with a wide network of national and international NGOs and other organizations that have helped to promote and support the park’s mission. This support has also helped to foster international recognition that indirectly bolsters local conservation efforts. To provide just one example, between the years of 2009-2012, the community of Cabo Pulmo was engaged in a fight against a large-scale tourism development project known as “Cabo Cortés” (Anderson 2014, 2015). Cabo Pulmo’s reputation as a global symbol of conservation helped spark and maintain this campaign, which dramatically ended when President Felipe Calderón announced, on national television, that the project was cancelled. Calderon specifically mentioned Cabo Pulmo in this widely publicized announcement (Vázquez 2016). Members of the community, particularly those associated with ACCP, engaged with national and international media to argue their case for protecting CPNP and preventing Cabo Cortés. This political victory was the result of effective engagement with the media and use of “storytelling” (see Leslie et al. 2015). Such strategic engagement with media continues to be a critical aspect of CPNP’s socio-political success. But the fame of CPNP may not be enough to secure its future.

Problems in “Paradise”

In January of 2017 I stopped by to talk with a local Mexican resident in Cabo Pulmo. She was busy, but took the time to sit down and talk with me. I asked her how everything was going. She told me that business is booming for many people, and that tourism has been on the rise. But, she explained, she is worried that the number of people coming to Cabo Pulmo may be too much to handle. There are just too many divers going out on the water, she said. And there are many other problems, she explained. The park staff is rarely there. The local community-based NGO had gone dormant; they’re no longer active, she said. They were very active in previous years, but no longer have much of a presence, she explained. There’s still a lack of services (like water), and little government action or support on any of these issues. And, she tells me, “People like Silvia Earle come here, with all the confetti and attention declaring Cabo Pulmo a huge success, but they don’t really address the realities here.”

From an outsider’s perspective, Cabo Pulmo appears to be an idyllic destination. It seems to be a model for environmental conservation, ecotourism, and sustainable development. But a closer look reveals a more complicated story. While CPNP is a functioning MPA, it remains in a rather tenuous state. Arguably, the park is able to function reasonably well because it is geographically isolated, receives a relatively low number of tourists per year in comparison

to many tourism destinations, and the East Cape region has experienced relatively little development and urbanization. But development is coming, and tourists are arriving in increasing numbers.⁴ CPNP's chronically weak governance cannot address growing threats, whether from a rising flow of tourists or poaching. What this means is that the primary support and vigilance for the park's governance invariably falls on the shoulders of local residents.

For years, however, CPNP has suffered from limited funding, staffing, and support. As Rife et al. (2012) explain, the governance situation in CPNP is reflective of wider issues throughout the Gulf of California. In brief, while Mexico's National Commission for Protected Areas (CONANP) creates and manages MPAs, and drafts the regulations that protect them, it does not have the jurisdictional power to actually enforce those rules (Rife et al. 2012:204). MPAs in Mexico fall under the jurisdiction of two different agencies: 1) the Federal Agency for the Protection of the Environment (PROFEPA), which is directly responsible for enforcing MPA rules; and 2) the National Commission of Aquaculture and Fisheries (CONAPESCA), which regulates fisheries (Rife et al. 2012:204). CONANP is underfunded and understaffed, as are PROFEPA and CONAPESCA. Rife et al. (2012:207) reported a staff of fewer than ten people for the entire Gulf of California, which includes CPNP. This translates to an extremely weak presence and enforcement throughout MPAs in the Gulf of California (ibid.). While the CPNP case may be slightly better than other MPAs in the region, it still suffers from very limited enforcement capabilities.

To illustrate the situation in CPNP, I'll provide an example. Since 2012, I have had numerous conversations with one local resident, Lorenzo. He married into one of the region's primary Mexican families and has been living in Cabo Pulmo since the late 1990s. We often talked informally in a spot with an excellent view of the coast, looking north toward Cabo Pulmo point. In 2012 as we talked, he saw a group of people down on the beach taking cobbles from the shore. Lorenzo told me that people aren't supposed to do that; it's against park rules. But, he explained, "there are no signs, and no patrols that try to stop people from taking rocks." Ironically, five years later in June of 2018, we were talking at the very same spot and we saw someone pull up in a white truck. They got out and started taking rocks from the beach. Lorenzo, frustrated, launched into another discussion about the complete lack of signs and park patrols, mentioning, as he has many times before, that he would be willing to step in to help patrol. Lorenzo is right. Patrols are few and far between. This lack of presence is compounded by the fact that there are few signs posted that clearly state the park's rules and regulations.

The situation on the edge of the MPA is indicative of consistent problems out on the water: like much of the rest of the Gulf of California (see Rife et al. 2012:207), illegal fishing is a constant challenge. In 2017, residents and business owners from Cabo Pulmo banded together to issue a formal complaint to Mexico's Ministry of the Environment

and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT, the agency that oversees CONANP), alerting authorities that incidents of illegal fishing have been on the rise (Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental 2017).

This latest response is illustrative of what has resulted from CPNP's longstanding weak governance: members of the community, to varying degrees, have often stepped up—or tried—to fill the enforcement and support gap. Such attempts are one reason why CPNP has achieved the success it has. But counting on "the community" to accomplish these critical tasks, especially without clear rules and rights, is a daunting task—mostly because Cabo Pulmo, while small, is quite socially divided and insufficiently empowered. Attempts to develop cohesive community responses in Cabo Pulmo have persistently faltered because of ongoing land disputes, social and economic disparities, and a history of tensions between local Mexican residents and (mostly American) expatriates.

The key problem, then, is that residents of Cabo Pulmo face several intertwined challenges that undermine their efforts to not only support the park, but also establish secure livelihoods. Combined, these issues pose a serious challenge for the long-term future of this protected area, since they undermine the very social base that is expected to fill the park's governance gaps and shortcomings. In time, if these concerns are not addressed, CPNP could end up being another biological success that ultimately fails because of insufficient attention to socio-political factors (Christie 2004; Mascia 2003). In the following paragraphs I outline these primary socio-political problems in more detail.

The first issue is the question of land. Cabo Pulmo has a long, contentious history when it comes to property ownership (Anderson 2014, 2017). Unlike many other parts of Mexico, there were no ejidos in the territory now known as Cabo Pulmo. The first landowners were granted land in the late 19th century by the Mexican government. This land was sold, gifted, and traded throughout the 20th century (see Weiant 2005). The land was surveyed and titled in the late 1960s and early 1970s; that is when the current conflicts began. The primary dispute centers around one transaction. An American expat bought property in Cabo Pulmo from a non-resident Mexican landowner who claimed to have a clear legal title. Members of the local Mexican community disputed this sale as illegitimate and illegal. The property purchased by the American expat became the primary foundation for the growing expat community. This dispute still resonates throughout the community today, and strongly shapes social relationships, particularly between Mexican residents and the expat population.

These disputes, in conjunction with rising land values and speculation, have created a multifaceted situation in which social tensions between Mexican residents and the expatriate population have increased. Such tensions have impeded numerous efforts—from within the community and by outside organizations—to create solidarity for supporting the national park. In addition, many of the local Mexican families simply cannot afford land. As these residents were (and still are)

often left with the task of filling CPNP's governance gap, this land insecurity presents a serious, ongoing problem. Building a solid foundation for their own livelihoods—and supporting the park—is challenging without a secure land base. In particular, the lack of secure, affordable land makes it difficult, if not impossible, for future generations to continue living and working in Cabo Pulmo. Some young families have already left (Anderson 2017). In summary, these land disputes undermine the livelihoods of local Mexican residents and further exacerbate the tensions between them and the expatriate population. These disputes have a negative impact on CPNP's overall governance, as they are a primary source of distrust and tension within the community.

A second factor that further complicates the situation in Cabo Pulmo is that the local Mexican community lacks basic social services, including reliable water and electricity systems, health services, roads, and schools. These problems have been recognized for years (see Gámez and Montaña 2004), and they persist. While tourists and expatriates can count on consistent access to potable water, this is not the case for the Mexican side of the community. For years, Mexican residents have voiced their complaints about the water situation. As Judith, a member of one of the primary Mexican families explained during an interview in 2012:

Look. The Mexican community has a well, but unfortunately it is not sufficient. For a long time we have been battling because there was not a generator to pump the water. It has been very difficult. Now, ACCP received a grant, and with this money we were able to buy a generator. So now's there's a generator, and it's pumping the water, but it's not enough. So right now we're trying to make a new well so we have the necessary infrastructure to be able to distribute to all of the households with a good system. But this is taking a lot of time because of politics and bureaucracy and permits and all of that...but Cabo Pulmo is a place that does not have water. But this is the Mexican side. The *extranjeros* [expatriates] do not have to fight for water because, well, we have an understanding that there is a system [owned by one of the American residents] that everyone pays for so they have their water. So, I think this is what a lot of the [expatriate] community ignores, that here there are a lot of problems with water. It is a big injustice but this is what's happening, no?

The water situation has improved slightly in the last few years, but the system in place is still insufficient and unreliable. Several members of the Mexican community corroborated this persistent problem during my follow-up visits in 2017 and 2018. These conditions create many daily problems for Cabo Pulmo's Mexican residents. These are problems that expat residents, and especially tourists, do not have to deal with. Because of the unreliable water infrastructure, residents often have to travel to the pueblo of La Ribera, the nearest town, to buy water and take care of basic needs like laundry. The water situation is just one example of the infrastructural problems in Cabo Pulmo. Combined, the lack of infrastructure and services leaves the community of Cabo Pulmo in a precarious state. While local residents are tasked with the job of stepping in and filling the

governance gaps in CPNP, they are also mired in a daily battle to secure basic resources.

The third issue that I highlight here comes down to the question of “community” in Cabo Pulmo itself. While many media reports, and even some academic papers, tend to characterize Cabo Pulmo as an idealistic, harmonious community that changed its ways and embraced conservation and ecotourism, social life is far more divided than it appears. This includes divisions between the expatriate community and Mexican residents, and also within the Mexican families themselves. In both cases, these social divisions have long histories. None of this should be surprising, especially considering the extensive literature that challenges oversimplified conceptions of community (e.g., Agrawal and Gibson 1999). Like so many other places around the world, Cabo Pulmo has its share of conflicts and divisions.

The land disputes, discussed above, form the core of the division between Mexican residents and the expatriates. These primary tensions are further exacerbated by personal disputes and broader cultural, linguistic, and class differences. In some cases these disputes are the result of bigotry and racism. In terms of language, while some of the expat residents have been living in the community for decades, very few of them are fluent Spanish speakers. This (in some cases willful) language barrier helps reify longstanding differences and divisions between the two sides of the community. The Mexican and expatriate sides of Cabo Pulmo live literally minutes away from one another, but these entrenched divisions, combined with daily patterns and habits, keep them quite separated. The number of residents who regularly cross these social boundaries is very small. Many of the expats, for example, simply refuse to go on the “Mexican” side of Cabo Pulmo. The enclave nature of Cabo Pulmo's expat community is not uncommon (see Topmiller et al. 2011).

These conflicts can also be traced to deeper cultural- and class-based values and philosophies about place, nature, and society. These differences reveal how various members of the community experience and envision Cabo Pulmo and its park. For example, while many of the community's Mexican residents express a desire for new roads and municipal power, a core segment of the expat community opposes such changes, largely on environmental and aesthetic grounds. For some, including the majority of the expats and tourists, Cabo Pulmo is a place of escape, a place where they can find and experience ‘nature’ away from urban life. Still, they can leave anytime. But for the Mexican residents, while Cabo Pulmo may hold similar environmentalist meanings, it is also home, a place of work and family, and a place where they hope to have the kinds of basic services (roads, electricity, schools) that their expat neighbors seek to escape. In many instances, the two sides seek to create and maintain a completely different place.

There is also social division within the Mexican community itself. The first residents to repopulate Cabo Pulmo were 19th century colonists from the mainland who received land grants. Many of the current residents trace their roots back to these early landowners (for more detail see Weiant

2005; Anderson 2014). When media reports and academic literature about Cabo Pulmo refer to “the community,” they are referring, for the most part, to members of one primary Mexican family that has played a central, very active role in CPNP. While members from the other two Mexican families have taken part, this family has been the most dominant since the creation of the park in the 1990s. To further complicate matters, even within this family there are some factions that have participated—and held more control—than others. When it comes to outside media depictions, these kinds of divisions within the community are simply not mentioned. This includes the expats, whose existence in Cabo Pulmo is rarely, if ever, mentioned in popular media. Such omissions are problematic, as they paint a picture of Cabo Pulmo that does not include its more complex histories, realities, and politics.

All of these divisions and conflicts affect—and are affected by—the National Park, which has a powerful presence in Cabo Pulmo. The park has become a key social and symbolic battleground between local Mexican residents, on one side, and expatriates and tourists on the other. For local Mexican residents, the park, much like the land, has become a point of contention that reveals tensions about rights, access, belonging, and sovereignty. For many of these residents, I argue, connection to the park has become a primary strategy for dealing with the issues mentioned above—from land disputes to conflicts with expatriates and external organizations (e.g., international NGOs) who seek to stake their claim not just in the park, but in the surrounding territories. Members of the local Mexican community have fought hard to stake their symbolic, social, and historical claims to CPNP. It is their foothold in this place, part of a resilient livelihood strategy. On many levels this strategy has been successful, and while they have forged a strong connection with the park, that relationship remains tenuous. These battles—over who rightfully should have a stake in the park—began in the early days of CPNP’s formation. And they persist.

Questioning Paradise

Cabo Pulmo is famous for being known as the small, harmonious community that changed its ways and launched a successful, globally renowned, national park. This story is both popular and appealing—for tourist and conservationist alike. The histories of CPNP, discussed above, demonstrate that what actually happened was more fraught, contentious, and tenuous. Local residents tell histories that include the successes, but also the challenges, hardships, and failures that came with the development of this protected area. The Cabo-Pulmo-as-paradise narrative obscures complicated, perhaps unpleasant histories. Such paradisiacal stories also paint a picture of conservation success as a matter of desire and choice rather than a difficult ongoing process that involves work, persistence, and politics. These are stories that erase the labor, loss, and risk that comes with conservation and environmental politics. But these romantic narratives

are also effective. Tourists flow, more and more each year, to the shores of Cabo Pulmo to get their taste of this eco-touristic paradise.

But Cabo Pulmo is not a natural or social paradise. It is a place where conservation successes have been achieved, but those successes were never guaranteed... and they are always subject to new challenges and threats. CPNP is an imperfect, ongoing project. Any conservation project is, as Haenn reminds us, “a process rather than an outcome” (2005:189). From the beginning, CPNP was meant to be grounded in community participation, which was one of the prominent conservation mantras of the 1990s. Despite this intention, the park was burdened by social conflict, minimal infrastructure, and inadequate resources for governance and enforcement. One of the primary problems that plagued CPNP from the beginning, I argue, is that the whole question of “community” was never adequately addressed. Many local residents took part, or tried to take part, in the development of the park in the early years. The ensuing conflicts often centered on questions of who had the right to be involved. Should it be controlled by government authorities and NGOs? Should expats from the US, Canada, and elsewhere have a say in its future? Or should the park explicitly support the rights and livelihoods of local Mexican residents? If so, who or what should be rightfully defined as the community? How will this process work? Much of this comes down to questions of ownership, rights, and whose interests protected areas and parks actually serve. Are these spaces designed for the abstract well-being and interests of “humanity”...or the concrete interests of specific peoples?

We should not assume that conservation, particularly when framed in terms of the broad interests of humanity, is by any means automatically egalitarian or uniformly beneficial. Conservation, as Brockington (2004) points out, can thrive despite rampant inequality. Here again, Cabo Pulmo is illustrative of and insightful for other protected areas around the world. CPNP is often framed, in environmentalist and conservationist discourse, as a locus of success and hope. As I have highlighted in this paper, there have been successes in both the ecological and biological sense. At the same time, many problems persist, and there’s no reason why the situation—especially with the current governance problems—could not rapidly deteriorate, despite all the fame and success. Indeed, it may be possible to reorganize CPNP—perhaps with extensive international funding—so that it becomes an exclusive, thriving space for biodiversity conservation, while at the same time dispossessing local residents and producing tremendous economic and social inequality. Such a future would, of course, be anathema to the park’s original mission, which was to foster conservation and social sustainability through community-based governance. But while the park’s mission is noble, its governance structure—and the wider politics that hold the park together—do little to actually reinforce that mission. Too much hope, I argue, was placed upon idealized notions of the possibilities of community.

In a 2013 assessment of CPNP, Oscar Arizpe, who played a pivotal role in founding the park, wrote about the issue of community participation:

Because all groups involved should participate in decision making, the major administrative structure in the reserve must be a council formed by representatives of local residents, tourism workers, educational and research centres and government agencies. But the enforcement system should be based on local residents and tourism companies. This stage of the process is where most of the protected areas of Mexico have met their biggest problems, sometimes so difficult to overcome that management plans are almost useless or never applied. It is hoped that in Cabo Pulmo, with the collaboration of the local residents, government agencies and all sectors involved, the ideal of a well-managed, self-sustained marine reserve will be achieved (2013:71).

This ideal, however, has not come to fruition in Cabo Pulmo. The central challenge hinges upon those unwieldy “human dimensions” that conservationists so adamantly seek to address. Unfortunately, and despite good intentions, in CPNP those human dimensions were reduced to an overly broad—and optimistic—reliance on the power of community participation to provide the key ingredient for success. Such hope—for a unified, harmonious local community to step in and provide that fundamental cohesive element that brings conservation together—has a long history. Community comes and goes—and then comes back again—as conservation’s ultimate savior. Cabo Pulmo is a case in point that illustrates the shortcomings of assuming—and relying upon—the notion that internally harmonious communities are the key to management problems. Perhaps it is time for a more robust intervention.

Conclusion

When Cabo Pulmo is represented as if it is a kind of social and ecological paradise, it appears that residents, tourists, the environment, and humanity as a whole all win. Such stories paper over many of the contradictions and complications of global conservation and tourism. In that sense, they are highly ideological. These stories tell consumers that they are contributing to the betterment of local people—and humanity—by grabbing plane tickets and visiting wondrous places like Cabo Pulmo. In reality, conservation produces winners and losers. It threatens, destabilizes, and dispossesses (West 2016). Or as Brockington et al. (2007:88) put it, conservation can all too easily result in the unequal distribution of “fortune and misfortune” for competing social groups. This is the case in CPNP just as it is with so many protected areas around the world. Some residents and participants benefit more than others. Some have more power, some less. Some stand to gain more than others. Some people have access to clean water, others do not. Everyone does not win. This is a reality that does not translate to enjoyable in-flight reading.

For Cabo Pulmo National Park, the path forward may begin with the abandonment of the hope for a small,

homogenous community that makes unified, collective decisions (Agrawal and Gibson 1999:640). As Agrawal and Gibson suggested nearly twenty years ago, it is far more productive to acknowledge divergent interests with human social arrangements, and the “politics through which those interests emerge” (1999:640). Protected area governance structures, rather than simply creating a slot to be filled by that harmonious community, should be explicitly designed to include avenues for working through disputes and resolving differences (Brenner 2014; Haenn 2005). As Haenn (2005:191) argues, given the right atmosphere, or platform, “people can work through ideological and practical differences.”

The seeds for such a platform already exist in CPNP through the Consejo Asesor, an institution and legal entity in Mexico that has shown promise in other protected areas (see Brenner 2014; Durand et al. 2012). In Cabo Pulmo, as with other cases in Mexico, the Consejo Asesor is an imperfect instrument that is hindered by tensions and limitations. CPNP’s Consejo, like others, has voice but limited authority. As Brenner suggests, it is necessary to convert this institution into a platform that allows for democratic decisions that are both binding and legitimate (2014:209). This is a call for institutionalized power that rests in local hands, without the assumption of harmonious communitarian idealism. Such a shift toward actually empowered co-management would undoubtedly have its own challenges, and it would take time (see Vaughan 2015), but it may be the most viable way forward. As the case of CPNP demonstrates, conflict, disagreement, and tension are the rule—not the exception. Protected areas—including Cabo Pulmo National Park—must be reconceptualized to address this reality, while, at the same time answering fundamental questions about whose interests, ultimately, these spaces serve.

Notes

¹For the sake of clarity and consistency, I use the term expatriate or “expat” to refer to the American, Canadian, and other non-Mexican residents of the East Cape. Often the term “expatriate” is reserved for affluent, mostly White populations who move temporarily or permanently to another country, while the term “immigrants” is reserved for poor, non-White populations. Cohen (1977:6-7) discussed the “fuzziness” of this term, which was originally meant to describe people who were “driven away or banished” from their native countries. Despite these problems, Cohen used the term to describe “voluntary temporary migrants, mostly from affluent countries, who reside abroad” for one or more reasons. My use of the term refers specifically to people who live in Cabo Pulmo either full-time (this is very rare) or for an extended period of time each year.

²Population numbers for Cabo Pulmo are difficult to obtain due to the highly mobile nature of some of the residents, especially the expatriates.

³Anaya and Arizpe (1998:234) only mention “local inhabitants” in their description of this process and do not indicate to what extent this included local Mexican residents versus expatriate residents.

⁴According to Bárcenas Bravo et al. (2008), Cabo Pulmo received approximately 3600 tourists per year in 2006. Álvarez del Castillo

Cárdenas (2012:52) reported an estimate of approximately 8600 per year by 2011. A report issued by The Nature Conservancy (Cisneros-Montemayor et al. ND:36) published an estimate of 22,000 to 37,000 tourists per year by around 2015-16, based in part upon analysis of Tripadvisor data. For 2017, official estimates approach 20,000 arrivals. Overall, however, these numbers are indicative of the rising number of tourists who are visiting Cabo Pulmo.

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