

LIMINALITY OF THE COASTS: A WORK IN PROGRESS

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I greatly appreciate the careful and critical readings of my essay provided by Madeleine Hall-Arber, Ratana Chuenpagdee, and Manuel Valdés Pizzini, each of whom brings far more expertise than I have to the issue of how we think about and research issues in coastal and nearshore marine management. I learned much from their remarks that is helping me clarify, refine, and modify my own thinking about the coasts and their liminality.

Hall-Arber, who has long sought to represent the lives and challenges faced by New England fishing families and communities, highlights the importance of including coastal ways of life and food security and self-sufficiency in management goals, and she brings to our attention recent organized efforts to insure local communities' access to fisheries resources and to increase their right and ability to participate in the management of those resources. Elsewhere she also underscores the importance of community in curbing the dangers of the liminal. Community-based management - or at least management that seeks to avoid hurting communities - is heavily promoted in many third world and some first world settings, and we have great hopes for it, as shown in examples Hall-Arber provides of efforts in New England such as the Penobscot East Resource Center.

The quest for recognition and restoration of community in coastal and fisheries management continues, however, to come up against arguments for much larger scale endeavors, based on features of the coastal and marine resources at stake, many of which are indeed at the scale of 'large marine ecosystems' or even global. An extreme case may be that of sea turtles. Conservation biologists and governments adopting conservation narratives increasingly use the scale of sea turtle migrations to recast rights of access and use and also management rights in ways that pit local residents against eco-tourists and increase the liminality, in our terms, of the ownership question (Campbell *et al.* 2007). As geographer Lisa Campbell argues (Campbell 2007), the argument is not just scientific. It is also political in terms of who has the right and power to determine which dimensions of sea turtle biology and behavior are salient and, ultimately, whose interests have priority. At a smaller scale and different political context is the quest of the Downeast Initiative in New England, mentioned by Hall-Arber, to come up with more localized finfish management to restore groundfish habitat and sub-populations, and its difficulty gaining support given the migratory behavior and strategies of larger-scale fishing ventures. Scale itself is socially constructed and often contested, and thus efforts at more community-relevant management are challenging to say the least.

I am intrigued by Hall-Arber's suggestion of a graduated continuum or complex of circles within circles to represent the complexities and varieties of

property in coastal regions, adding factors such as the cost of entry (relative wealth in her text) that could shift a particular complex of rights to or from the poles of open access/ public property and exclusive private property. In other papers (McCay 1999) I have suggested that we not only develop a fine-grained analysis of the dimensions of property rights, as has the economist Anthony Scott (Scott 1996), Figure 1 below, but also explore the factors that contribute to the capacity of communities to effectively manage common pool resources such as fisheries (McCay and Jentoft 1998), including for example the degree of dependence on marine environments, of shared interests and knowledge, of clear boundaries or criteria for participation, whether there has been sustained interaction among members of the community, how secure rights are and the degree of local autonomy versus dependence on outside governance, etc. (Figure 2). In both cases, one can analyze a particular case according to how it fits on such scales, as indicated in blue for a hypothetical case in Figure 2.

Figure 1: The Quality of Property Rights

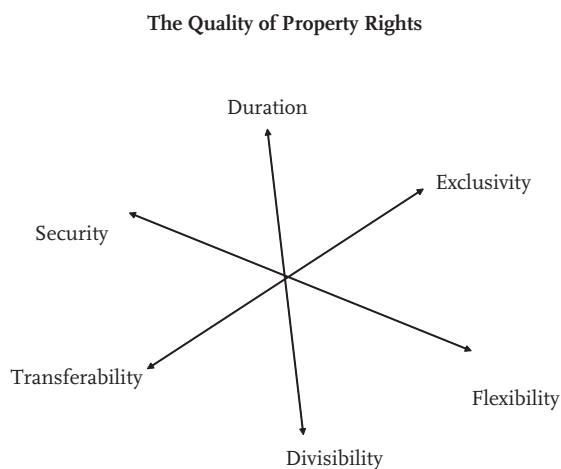
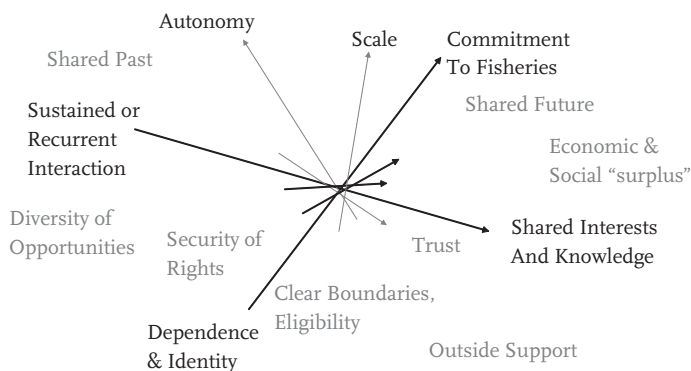


Figure 2: The Quality of Community



This is one way to open up the question of 'property rights' to the more complex social and historical realities of people and their environments, intended as an adjunct to common property theorists who have usefully distinguished use and access rights from management rights as well as rights to create the systems, or constitutional rights (Schlager and Ostrom 1992). The features of community in Figure 2 are illustrative only; they could be enhanced by a more deliberate attention to different kinds of property rights held by the community as such as well as by members of the community.

Ratana Chuenpagdee's experience is with the larger international and transnational domain of coastal and integrated ocean policy, and she notes that the question 'who owns the coast?' is not often raised in that discourse. After pointing out that the topic is usually 'governance' rather than property rights (even though property rights are key components of governance), she offers an 'interactive governance' approach as an alternative to the ownership/property rights perspective, building on the work she has been doing with Jan Kooiman, Svein Jentoft, and others. This is another way to complexify the matter, and, indeed, to focus on the 'wicked' question of complexity, in Rittel and Webber's terms.

Characterizing ocean and coastal governance problems as wicked - in the sense of being difficult to define and delineate from other problems and requiring recurrent or constant attention because they are never completely resolved - complements our notion of liminality due to the complexity, dynamics, and diversity of fisheries and coastal systems. In anthropological theory the liminal is wicked indeed, and Chuenpagdee and her colleagues have pointed to the limits of truly integrated, top-down governability and the need for more diverse, devolved, and creative processes, an argument found also in the work of Emery Roe (Roe 1998).

I agree with Chuenpagdee that the discourse of stewardship and shared responsibility needs to be elevated over that of rights and ownership, but the two are essentially intertwined. Stewardship depends on some degree of assigned 'right' and expectation for future returns - putting those with few rights and low expectations into the position of likely villains of the commons. One may, however, have rights and expectations of future returns from something that is held, as she writes, 'as a heritage and as a collective responsibility', and under some conditions these can provide strong incentives for stewardship (Costello and Kaffine 2008). Moreover, property rights theorists have an expansive notion of property, that it can be public, common, private, and variations thereof. Thus, what Chuenpagdee refers to as 'heritage' can be an important component as well as outcome of property rights.

So, yes, the discourse of 'rights' can get in the way of effective stewardship, focusing as it may on competition and exclusion rather than cooperation and collective action; on privilege rather than responsibility. On the other hand, it also points to way to the need to be clear about who the 'public participants' or 'stakeholders' are, and the possibility that the differences among them in terms of access and use rights, management rights, even voting rights, may make a big difference to their abilities and willingness to be engaged in coastal management projects and have a sense of belonging.

Manuel Valdés Pizzini contributes to this discussion from his perspective as an anthropological scholar of social processes, history, and culture in the Caribbean. He draws our attention to ongoing disputes over ownership of beaches in Puerto Rico, where public claims to access are challenged by private owners in law and practice. In turn their claims, their greed, are propelled by the escalating monetary value of coastal property. Public efforts to protect public rights are in a sense efforts to restore them, given the context of a rich and troubled history that had obliterated public rights to much of the littoral of Puerto Rico's islands.

Valdés Pizzini takes me to task for not going far enough into the topic of identity, belonging, and citizenship, as he and David Griffith have done in their important work in Puerto Rico, as well as 'The Estuary's Gift', Griffith's powerful study of North Carolina's coast and coastal dwellers (Griffith 1999). He is right. Much more attention needs to be given to coasts as places of exchange of commodities of narratives; of the creation, transition, and destruction of livelihoods and identity. Coasts are truly liminal. Studies of coastal ecosystems and dwellers may also lead us to question some of our fondest categories. What is 'traditional' and what is 'modern', what is 'local' and what is 'global' if peoples and marine creatures of the coasts have such long histories as they often do of movement, change, and exchange(Walley 2004)?

Valdés Pizzini also underscores the frailty of coasts due to the extent to which they are desired and therefore 'developed', and to their inherent fluidity and vulnerability to changes in weather and sea. **Their frailty is enhanced in the politics of coastal management**, where it seems, at least in the Puerto Rican case, that clear boundaries and other criteria needed for management of fragile beaches are intentionally ignored or defeated in order to keep the situation transient and contingent. Keeping it liminal provides space for developers to manoeuvre.

This last suggests an additional point, appropriate to the conclusion of this response: to an important degree the 'liminality' of coasts is itself socially and politically constructed. **If, then, in our discourse through my essay and these commentaries**, we are contributing to that effort, I hope that we are doing so in a way that contributes to the robustness rather than the frailty of the coasts and the people who treasure and live from and on them.

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