

THE 30X30 CONSERVATION RACE: A DILEMMA FOR SMALL-SCALE FISHERS?

Felix Mallin and Hugh Govan

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Setting aside 30% of the planet’s surface for conservation by 2030, otherwise known as ‘30x30’, has perhaps become today’s most resounding catchphrase in global conservationist circles. As of July 2022, more than 100 countries have joined the [High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People](#) (HAC), a group of states rallying behind the 30x30 target, including all G10 countries. The campaign is being driven by conservation foundations and affiliated scientists as well as corporations and financial institutions advocating for a global new [deal for nature](#).¹ Put simply, the stated ambition of their call is to link the Paris Agreement and the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD), in a bid to combine terrestrial and marine biodiversity protection with climate action under a single umbrella. There is now a strong expectation that 30x30 might be formally endorsed when the parties to the CBD convene to adopt [a post-2020 global biodiversity framework](#) (GBF) in Montreal in December 2022.

Whether this constitutes a realistic target remains highly uncertain. Its apparent simplicity belies a lack of agreement on the degree of protection (or exclusion) that is called for, and whether it should be applied by all countries equally. Almost all aspirational targets set by governments for the environment in the past have failed. Indeed, the Aichi targets, agreed to by the CBD in 2010, set the ambition of creating 10% marine protected area (MPA) coverage by 2020. Globally, this target has [nearly been achieved \(8%\)](#), but [the diversity of outcomes between countries and contexts](#) hardly supports ramping up more of the same. Issues of effective implementation or appropriate siting of MPAs seem to have been overlooked. Making the new target even more likely to fail is that some large coastal countries have not joined the HAC, including Brazil, China, Russia and Indonesia. However, beyond the question of how feasible it is, there are urgent questions over the desirability of the 30x30

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PHOTO | Hugh Govan

01 The lead author of the Rockefeller Foundation-funded 2020 study proposing the 30x30 target was previously chief scientist at World Wildlife Fund and is now a director at Resolve; a Washington-based non-profit consultancy that brings [“policy, strategy, and communications expertise, and networks, seed funds, and impact finance to its project partners”](#), which include trans-national mining companies, such as Rio Tinto.

campaign as well. This is particularly important from the perspective of large numbers of small-scale fishers for whom rapidly enlarging MPAs could be threatening to their livelihoods.

The following conversation between Felix Mallin and Hugh Govan unpacks some of the implications of a global 30% target for the oceans and what might be at stake for small-scale fishers and other coastal communities in terms of access and control over marine resources.

Felix Mallin [FM]: Hugh, thanks so much for taking the time to share your views on 30x30. Could you say a few general words on where you see the merit of protecting biodiversity and mitigating effects of climate change through Protected Areas and area-based management tools? And how wise is it to suddenly ratchet up such tools to 30% of planetary space within the span of a few years?

Hugh Govan [HG]: Protected Areas can be effective instruments for the sustainable management of biodiversity, fisheries, or even cultural values. The human species has millennia of experience of working with them. In the right circumstances they are, without doubt, an excellent tool. That said, biodiversity is integrated into human activity and food provision at all levels. Sometimes for good, sometimes for worse, yet it always remains interwoven within complex socio-ecological relations. In other words, you cannot really be sure that if you pull one string, you won't unravel the whole thing. With 30%, we are talking about a vast array of habitats: from deserts, jungles and mountains to coastal wetlands, reefs and open oceans. It is impossible to assert that there is a tool that should cover an equal proportion of all these habitats around the globe. The diverse countries that are now going to be blanketed with 30% all have distinct governance systems, distinct nutritional dependencies on their own resources, and their respective ecosystems are in vastly different shapes. So, you would expect tailoring of approaches to manage biodiversity on a case-sensitive basis, whether on inhabited land or in the open sea.

FM: Speaking of marine environments, when we think of ocean-space, there are enormous geographical and socio-economic differences amongst coastal and island nations. 30% means one thing for countries like France, United Kingdom or the United States, as these countries control millions of square miles of Exclusive Economic Zones that are remnants of their colonial dominions. Compare this to other HAC supporters like India, Cambodia or Senegal, where uninhibited access to lakes and oceans is the crucial lifeline for millions of small-scale fishers. Are countries in the South signing on to something which will bring unintended obligations and consequences?

HG: It is important to realize that the target, if adopted at the CBD meeting in December, is not going to be a decision based on careful scientific considerations. As the 30x30 advocates openly admit, it is a [political bargain](#). An idea is being proposed by the North and the South will be negotiating to get the best deal possible. Theoretically, the South should be in a strong position because most of the remaining biodiversity, including global fish stocks, is left with them. Yet, what is worrying is that there is a high risk the final decision could be influenced by positive publicity and attracting new conservation dollars from big donors. The recent [controversial debt-for-ocean swaps](#), for example, illustrate how governments can commit to dubious environmental promises when these are tied to short term fixes for a national debt crisis. I am aware of several countries that have formally endorsed 30x30, where people inside the government are highly uncomfortable with the idea.

For the political leaders it is an opportunity for funding and prestige that they do not want to forgo. Yet, for those that ought to translate and implement this nationally and locally, it is a potential disaster with knock-on effects ranging from the implementation of existing environmental management strategies to additional strains on already tight budgets. [Expert studies](#) for [African](#) and other developing nations are very clear in highlighting that there are environmental management issues that need to be addressed *before* 30x30 can become a useful contribution to biodiversity protection. At the most basic level, this concerns adequately funded and staffed government departments responsible for fisheries or environmental conservation. Without such basic government capacity in place, the 30% target will likely result in a ballooning of new paper parks; that is, areas that are legally designated but have no effective management. Ultimately, I think, this focus on 30x30 could mean government agencies have to enforce a relatively pointless target, when they are not even able to police crucial priorities such as ocean pollution generated by industries or to enforce Environmental Impact Assessments and management plans. Besides, it is also likely to [undermine local conservation](#) models and result in a further constraining of access rights for small-scale fishers, who will be involuntarily compelled to rescind their food sovereignty for an international paper target without receiving adequate compensation or alternative provisions. Continuing the trend we have seen over the previous three decades, it might actually propel the vicious cycle of smuggling, [piracy](#) and fishers' criminalization.

FM: Now, for some leaders, even 30x30 is not enough. Clearly to the delight of the big philanthropic donors and ocean celebrities present in the room, outgoing President of Colombia Iván Duque commended his country for taking a '30 before 30' approach at the recent [United Ocean Conference in Lisbon](#), which he touted a moral imperative: "this is not political, this is not ideological, this is for the favor of humanity". While in Lisbon, he was in fact dodging the ceremony for the release of the country's long-awaited [truth commission report](#) back home. Plainly, leaders that are domestically unpopular enjoy being champions for the environment on the international stage, especially when that might help them secure a comfortable UN post after their terms. This brings us to the current lobby campaign for 30x30 and the question of legitimacy. Both its ecological and [economic rationales](#) are being formulated in [a certain scientific milieu](#) situated in the affluent parts of the world. Conversely, the potential [social and economic repercussions](#) of the target have not been the subject to proper parliamentary debates or consultative processes in most states. Are the 30x30 champions aware of the political risks of their campaign, which is characterized by a hurried top-down approach?

HG: There are genuine conservationists that still believe that the fortress conservation model (exclude humans and everything will be alright) is what the planet needs. Moreover, the experience of the past 40 years has shown to them that lobbying governments directly is much more effective than going through democratic processes. A cynic might say that they have taken a page out of the same book as the capitalists who have wrought havoc on the planet for their profits. This political hubris is particularly acute in the booming [conservation finance industry](#). Therefore, a common problem small-scale fishers face is that when new environmental regulations or no-take MPAs are introduced, they are usually enforced on them; disproportionately affecting those living under already precarious circumstances, and who often have limited means for political voice. Meanwhile, the truly problematic users such as industrial fisheries or oil and gas are spared. This is unsurprising since they are much better connected to both governments and conservation donors. If you talk about legitimacy, what is truly needed is a strengthening of

[rights-based approaches](#) that address the threats in a geographically, economically and culturally sensitive context. But 30x30 is a much easier political solution: it sounds good, it fits a meme, it makes everybody think that a lot is now being done, so [business can go on as usual](#).

FM: Yet, there are factions of conservation scientists that maintain no-take MPAs have been [very effective in biodiversity conservation](#), and indeed more so than fisheries management. They claim that it is the most promising path to restore ecosystems and that MPAs have positive spill-over effects for adjacent fisheries and biodiversity. Is there scientific consensus on this view?

HG: Well, there are many studies on coral reef systems and other inshore areas showing a whole range of outcomes. If effectively implemented, then biodiversity will likely be protected from extractive impacts and in some cases this may allow fish stocks to replenish, breed and contribute to coastal fisheries. But by no means is this scientific consensus without many caveats on where MPAs are located, whether other threats are addressed, and especially whether they are effectively implemented. All these concerns become compounded with the size of the protected area. We have data and studies to show that managing migratory stocks like skipjack tuna through so-called large-scale MPAs [is not a cost-effective option](#). Plus, most of the negative impacts on biodiversity are not necessarily happening inside the areas being designated for protection and are likely a lot more complex to deal with. Crucially, they only work if backed by considerable investment into things that are not very attractive to philanthropic donors and aid agencies, such as functioning day-to-day governments with budgets, policing and anti-corruption work. So, biodiversity-concerned governments in the South, who wish to maintain independence from donors but simultaneously need to generate income from fisheries, would be ill-advised to close off 30% rather than opting for cost-effective management approaches. For instance, without external assistance the nine signatory states of the [Nauru Agreement](#) in the Pacific, situated across the major skipjack tuna range, implemented their own management system, which by all accounts has led to the most [sustainably managed tuna fisheries in the world](#). In Tuvalu, the enormous rise in fee income allowed the government to [increase the spending for local governance on outer island communities](#).

FM: That sounds rather promising. In fact, more recently, at least in academic writing and political rhetoric, we could witness an amplification of social justice-focused and community-based marine conservation postulates. What do you think is the current outlook for small-scale fishers and how might they best position themselves in this debate?

HG: The mutually reinforcing benefits of respect for small-scale fishers' rights to access and global ocean health is well-established. It was reiterated in their recent [declaration](#), following the frustrating UN Ocean Conference, where other actors repeatedly tried to instrumentalize the voices of small-scale fishers and indigenous communities to their own ends. Usually, small-scale fishers are very pragmatic about how sustainable use can contribute to conserving nature as well as sustaining their livelihoods and fish supplies to the population. This utilitarian approach does not necessarily sit well with some conservationists, and though it may reflect wiser sustainable use and guardianship of coastal resources, say, by Indigenous Peoples, it may also reflect fisher or community self-interest in terms of sustaining the coastal resources that provide their livelihoods. But having to accommodate an externally imposed proportion of their fishing grounds being removed from use, or any

rigidity in what otherwise might be adaptive management, will add another huge burden to their already complicated situations. Confederations of fishers in the Pacific, for example, have long called for [100% management](#) models. Such models tick all the boxes. Sadly, they still seem too complicated and undesirable politically to be supported by leaders, compared to just saying: we are closing off 30% of the ocean, especially, if we can count parts of the oceans that nobody can see. In sum, it might be politically beneficial for the case of global small-scale fishers to forge stronger alliances with terrestrial biodiversity struggles. I believe people would take much more interest in the debate if they realized that 30% applies to land as well. When landholders start asking: which third of my land is going to be cut out for a particular use, then skirting consultation and discussion will become incrementally more difficult.

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