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Cooperation, Community and the Commons: Building Equity and Protecting Reefs in Bocas Del Toro, Panama

Robert "BJ" Atanasio

Ethnographers have described many communities that manage and sustain important resources through traditional tenure regimes. However, many of these communities have a homogenous composition, with the members sharing cultural and social norms, and the local economy is not strongly tied to external markets. In many other instances, communities remain dependent upon natural resources, but lack an identifiable regime to manage them. These communities are often more diverse. They often are mosaic of newer arrivals or immigrants and lack the social capital created by customary management practices. In these cases, it may be helpful to identify institutions that have the potential to function like long-established tenure practices. The Unión de Pescadores Artesanales Bocatoreños (UPESABO) provides micro-loans and small business training to a small community of artisan fishermen in the Bocas del Toro archipelago in the Republic of Panama. This case study examines UPESABO's efforts to improve the standing of fishermen in the community; to create fair market value for fishery products; and to manage fishing impacts on local coral reefs. Institutional objectives and goals are identified through document analysis. Implementation of practices and policies are evaluated through participatory observation and interviews of UPESABO members, the community and organizers. In addition, the author surveyed a sampling of members regarding ethnic identity and demographic attributes. The analysis of questionnaire results did not indicate correlations between ethnicity and selected attributes, suggesting that differing social norms do not hinder participation in the coop. This case study indicates that UPESABO's institutional organization lends itself to supporting conservation behaviors. In communities without traditional tenure regimes, organizations that create resource equity may provide similar benefits.

Robert BJ Atanasio
146 Henry St
San Francisco, CA 94114
bjatanaz@earthlink.net