

Averting the “tragedy of the commons”: Why have so few rules emerged in Palauan women’s fisheries?



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Women’s Fisheries are Different

Palauan women utilize different marine resources than do men. Whereas fishermen specialize in finfish, fisherwomen specialize in marine invertebrates. The impressive assortment of rules governing Palauan men’s fishing are well documented (e.g. Johannes 1981). However, rules governing Palauan women’s fishing are notably absent, despite the fact that these resources and resource users are co-located.

Men’s Fisheries	Women’s Fisheries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • area restrictions • species restrictions • site rotation • time restrictions • periodic <i>bul</i> prohibition • <i>tabu</i> species • limited entry (men) • gear restrictions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very rare <i>bul</i> prohibition • <i>tabu</i> species • sea cucumber export ban



Hypotheses: Why Are They Different?

1. Resources harvested by women were non-essential to food security.
2. Due to natural barriers (e.g. infrequency of very low tides, lack of refrigeration), harvesting never exceeded sustainable levels and scarcity was rarely, if ever, observed.
3. This particular resource was overlooked, since the ocean is viewed as men’s domain and the land as women’s.

Circumstances Have Changed

1. Today, a few women rely on the resources for their livelihoods.
2. New technologies have broken-down natural barriers (e.g. gear to access resource more frequently, refrigeration and preservation).
3. Lucrative local and international markets demand these products.
4. According to fisherwomen, scarcity is the new norm.

Future Research Directions

- How are rules formed for Palauan women’s fisheries?
 - Case study: 1994 export ban on sea cucumbers
 - 2011 temporary lift of export ban leads to near collapse
- What role do men and women play in rule formation?
- What hints might this give about past rule formation?
- How are rules enforced, and by whom?
- What is the sociocultural value of Palauan women’s fisheries?

Methods

I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with Palauan fisherwomen, including 3 expert fisherwomen (lifelong and active fishers over 40) over the course of 8 weeks in summer 2018 in Palau. I participated in reef gleaning with one of these experts for ~12 hours. Countless informal discussions also inform this research.

References

Johannes, R. E. (1981). *Words of the lagoon: fishing and marine lore in the Palau district of Micronesia*. Univ of California Press.
 Ostrom, E. (2009). A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems. *Science*, 325(5939), 419-422.
 Map: Coral Reef Research Foundation, Palau.

Acknowledgements

Mesulang to the many women who dedicated their time and energies to this project. Thank you also to my advisors, William Durham, Fiorenza Micheli, and Robert Richmond. This project would not be possible without funding from E-IPER and the McGee-Levorsen Fund.