Assessing governability of environmental protected areas in Phetchaburi and Prachuap Kirikhan, Thailand

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Abstract

Environmental degradation continues in Thailand, despite the establishment of several environmental protected areas (EPAs) since their inception in 1992. EPAs aim to promote the conservation and sustainability of natural resources through decentralization and improving the participation of local governments and communities. Not all EPAs are successful, however. The purpose of this paper is to examine factors affecting the implementation of the EPAs program in Thailand, using the Phetchaburi and Prachuap Kirikhan EPA, in southern Thailand as a case study. Following the governability assessment framework, natural, social, and governing systems associated with the EPA were first described in terms of diversity, complexity, dynamics, and spatial and jurisdictional scale. Next, we examined the extent to which the EPA, as a participatory regulatory tool, corresponded with the natural and social systems it aimed to govern. The analysis reveals that the EPA did not function as effectively as it should be, even though the governing system was well structured to deal with complex coastal ecosystems in the area. The deficiency in the function of the EPA was due largely to poor sectoral coordination, weak financial commitments, and uncoordinated governing interactions. Based on these findings, we suggest that the EPA should be situated in a broader context of land and marine spatial planning and that it needs to be attuned to existing policies in a way that collaboration between agencies and policy integration is possible.

Keywords

Governability Interactive governance Environmental protected area Sustainability Spatial planning

Introduction

Sustainable development of coastal areas is difficult to achieve (Chua 2006). In addition to high diversity, complexity and dynamics, and multiple interactions between natural and human systems (Chuenpagdee et al. 2008), many coastal zones around the world face rapid and unplanned development, population growth and demographic change, all of which contribute to loss of habitats, increased erosion and ecological deterioration (Kay and Alder 2005). Further, the cross-sectoral, cross-boundary and overlapping jurisdictional issues of coastal zones create a ‘wicked’ governance problem. As posited by Rittel and Webber (1973), wicked problems are those that are difficult to define, as stakeholders may disagree about the causes of the problems. Consequently, wicked problems have no easy solution and attempts to solve them may lead to more problems in the future (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2009; Balint et al. 2011).

Several regulatory measures have been carried out worldwide to address the aforementioned concerns and to improve coastal governance. In Thailand, examples of these efforts include the designation of national parks, mangrove preservation areas and fishery conservation areas through legislative measures. The latest nationwide initiative in coastal conservation occurred in 1992 with the introduction of Environmental Protected Areas (EPAs) as a legislative tool to promote environmental sustainability, in line with the global movement towards sustainable development at that time (WCED 1987). While EPAs are government-led initiatives, they are not implemented as a top-down process but through