Key players in conservation diffusion: using social network analysis to identify critical injection points

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Identifying the right stakeholders to engage with is fundamental to ensuring conservation information and initiatives diffuse through target populations. Yet this process can be challenging, particularly as practitioners and policy makers grapple with different conservation objectives and a diverse landscape of relevant stakeholders. Here we draw on social network theory and methods to develop guidelines for selecting 'key players' better positioned to successfully implement four distinct conservation objectives: (1) rapid diffusion of conservation information, (2) diffusion between disconnected groups, (3) rapid diffusion of complex knowledge or initiatives, or (4) widespread diffusion of conservation information or complex initiatives over a longer time period. Using complete network data among coastal fishers from six villages in Kenya, we apply this approach to select key players for each type of conservation objective. We then draw on key informant interviews from seven resource management and conservation organizations working along the Kenyan coast to investigate whether the socioeconomic attributes of the key players we identified match the ones typically selected to facilitate conservation diffusion (i.e., 'current players'). Our findings show clear discrepancies between current players and key players, highlighting missed opportunities for progressing more effective conservation diffusion. We conclude with specific criteria for selecting key stakeholders to facilitate each distinct conservation objective, thereby helping to mitigate the problem of stakeholder identification in ways that avoid blueprint approaches. These guidelines can also be applied in other research and intervention areas, such as community development studies, participatory research, and community intervention.