The Northern Mozambican Channel –
A marine biodiversity hotspot at a crossroads

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Abstract

Mozambique is among the world’s ten most impoverished nations, and Cabo Delgado Province, including the islands of the Quirimbas Archipelago in the Northern Mozambique Channel, among its least developed regions. Artisanal fishing communities of the area are among the poorest of the poor, and rely almost exclusively on the health of fisheries and the natural environment for their livelihoods. The Northern Mozambican Channel is increasingly recognised as one of the world’s most biologically diverse coral reef ecosystems. The region’s reefs are also uniquely resilient to coral bleaching, are highly productive and are relatively unaffected by contemporary human impacts compared with many other reefs of East Africa. Strategically located at the divergence point of the South Equatorial Current, they also serve as important source reefs, helping to replenish marine ecosystems along the east African coast.

With one of Africa’s biggest infrastructure developments set to begin operation in the region, increasing impacts from a changing climate, and growing human populations, the unique marine ecosystems of the Northern Mozambique Channel are under increasing pressure. Balancing the region’s critical need for economic development with protection of its natural riches is among Mozambique’s greatest and most pressing challenges. Solutions to these conservation and economic development challenges demand innovative thinking, concerted action and collaboration across multiple sectors. We discuss a new regional initiative that brings together multiple partners including the private sector, not-for-profit organisations, local communities and tertiary institutions, with the aim of supporting well-targeted research, strategic conservation decision-making, and local capacity-building and empowerment through education and close collaboration with local partners and communities.