

Recognising The Importance Of The Cultural Oceanscape In Regional Marine Spatial Planning

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Background

Current area-based ocean management approaches in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region, such as marine spatial planning (MSP), are often characterised by economic or environmental objectives, paying limited consideration to social and cultural dimensions. There is a recognised lack of research on the cultural dimensions of ocean management, and cultural dimensions of coastal environments remain poorly understood in both South Africa and the broader WIO region. Failing to properly recognise the importance of cultural connections to and interactions with the ocean and coast can hinder collaborative management, reduce trust and reproduce social inequalities by limiting people's access to spiritual, traditional and recreational uses of the ocean and coast.

Working within a transdisciplinary research team and situated in Algoa Bay, South Africa, the first pilot site for the national MSP process, this study set out to explore how several different methodologies, including arts-based participatory research (ABPR) methods, participatory community mapping (PCM) exercises, and surveys engaging coastal community residents could better identify, recognise and 'map' cultural connections that should be integrated into MSP for more inclusive ocean governance. South Africa is one of the leading countries on MSP development in the WIO region and this study discusses lessons learned and future opportunities for improved recognition of the cultural seascape in the WIO region more broadly.

Method

This study developed and utilised contextualised ABPR methods in the form of photovoice and digital storytelling where Indigenous and local community representatives were recognised as co-researchers and not as objectified 'research subjects'. Digital storytelling refers to audio recordings of co-researchers' self-narrated stories, experiences or anecdotes, whilst photovoice is a process where co-researchers take photographs to understand or explore a particular place, issue or connection that is important to them, like their connection to the ocean and coast. The study also conducted PCM exercises of sociocultural uses in the Algoa Bay area as well as an online ArcGIS Survey with a questionnaire that allowed people to expand on their different uses of the coast and demarcate possible culturally significant areas in Algoa Bay that should be recognised in future marine area plans.

Specifically, the research steps involved i) initial workshops with Indigenous and local knowledge holders to shape the research objectives, ii) training workshops in photography and audio recording audio using smartphones, iii) field visits to sites of cultural significance to take photographs and record stories in-situ, iv) collaborative analysis workshops with co-researchers to identify common themes and cultural uses that should be recognised in decision-making and conduct participatory community mapping exercises, v) a public exhibition where co-researchers presented their final photographs and stories, and vi) an online ArcGIS survey questionnaire to the broader Algoa Bay community to further identify cultural uses and culturally significant areas in the Bay.

Results

Firstly, the study highlights important cultural connections to the ocean and coast that should be better recognised and integrated into area-based ocean management processes such as MSP. For example, the co-researchers involved in the ABPR and PCM exercises emphasise both intangible and tangible cultural heritage, spiritual connections to the ocean, how the ocean and coast is vital for learning, mental health and healing, and various recreational connections that should be better recognised and highlighted. Secondly, the study finds that there is a strong sense of exclusion from and lack of access to some coastal and ocean areas in Algoa Bay where Indigenous and local communities have depended on for spiritual, cultural and recreational purposes for several generations. This further highlights the importance and urgency of integrating these cultural connections in ocean management approaches.

Thirdly, although some intangible cultural heritage and connections are too sensitive or sacred to map, there is a need to make a greater effort in mapping cultural connections to the ocean and coast to ensure more inclusive ocean governance and equitable access to the ocean and coast. Finally, the study found that the methods, which focus on co-creating knowledge with Indigenous and local knowledge holders, have been useful in encouraging people to reimagine ways in which ocean governance can better recognise cultural connections and become more inclusive. For example, using photography and in situ storytelling often allows people to convey memories and histories of more accessible coastlines, or envisaging a future with more inclusive and participatory ocean management. Future research on cultural dimensions of ocean governance in the WIO region should therefore prioritise ABPR and participatory mapping methods to move towards greater socio-cultural sustainability and equality.

Conclusion

The study concludes that emphasising these cultural connections and better recognising them in ocean management has the potential to include people's awareness of the ocean which could translate into an increased sense of care and stewardship towards the ocean and coast as people feel more connected to their contextual oceanscapes. Co-creation of knowledge regarding connections, values and priorities of the coast and ocean with Indigenous and local communities should therefore be intentionally designed as part of adaptive management processes in the WIO region, as this could contribute to a more sustainable sociocultural approach to

ocean management which is necessary for equitable and sustainable future ocean wellbeing, both socially and ecologically. The study concludes with several practical opportunities and recommendations for integrating cultural connections in regional ocean science and area-based ocean management processes such as MSP.

