INTEGRATING ART INTO OCEAN LITERACY FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN KENYA

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Submission:
Background
The expression of ideas using art is not new in Africa. Ancient civilizations used art to express ideas as seen in pre-historic caves. Within modern day societies, ideas continue to be conveyed visually through film, drama and art; particularly in the area of wildlife conservation. This can be seen in Kenyan art work in public spaces which frequently showcases aspects of nature and conservation. It is common to encounter statues, showcasing the Big Five (elephants, lions, buffalos, leopards, and rhinos) in public spaces. The recent Blue Economy dialogue shifted the national focus from land to the ocean space. As coastal counties gain prominence in the Blue Economy space, we expect to see images of ocean species captured in art pieces, in public spaces and art work on sale, in a similar manner to terrestrial species. Broadening ocean literacy to integrate art contributes to robust knowledge of the ocean, enhances learning and expertise, and generates value driven responses that may improve conservation and management ethics. Our study aimed to assess the visual prominence of ocean art in the coastal counties of Mombasa and Kilifi Counties. The occurrence of billfish art was of particular interest as they are considered to be an iconic species and a top predator in the ocean. We focused on opportunities for production of ocean art, support for community-based livelihoods and solutions for practice and policy.

Method
We undertook the survey from 24th May to 16th June 2021 in the counties of Mombasa and Kilifi, Kenya. The specific study sites were locations where there were artists and art markets. We obtained 1.) Quantitative data from observations of artwork in public spaces and in art markets, 2.) Data from semi structured questionnaires and 3.) Insights from focus group discussions. The COVID 19 season limited the number of artists that we could access and therefore, we interviewed a total of 29 artists in the two counties. We obtained information regarding the production of ocean art and the art value chain in these counties. We also assessed policy support in the County Integrated Development Plans (CIDP) of the two counties.
Results
In the public spaces, we found that terrestrial wildlife art pieces were dominant in Mombasa County with 78% of the pieces containing wildlife features. In Kilifi County, there was a balance between the terrestrial and ocean themes (50% for each) in public spaces. The content analysis of popular pieces demonstrated the popularity of wildlife and terrestrial themes in Mombasa County with 83% of the pieces containing this theme. In Kilifi County, 62% of the popular pieces had terrestrial content. Billfish art work dominated in Kilifi County as fiber glass sculptures and in Mombasa as paintings on the walls of fish shops. Familiarity with billfish was higher in Kilifi (41.7%) compared to Mombasa County (14.3%). Billfish are common in Kilifi because Malindi and Watamu are globally renowned sportfishing hotspots. Commissioned art work on billfish and models made for sport fishers is a key market for billfish art. An analysis of the art clients in both Mombasa and Kilifi Counties showed that majority of those who purchased the art were foreigners accounting for 86.7% of the buyers in Kilifi County and 64.7% in Mombasa County. Overall, they spent between Kshs 400 (USD 4) and Kshs 1,300,000 (USD 13,000) in their art purchases. Majority of the respondents (88%) rely on art as their primary occupation and proceeds from art provided significant livelihood support including the support to build homes. The impact of COVID 19 was significant as most of the artists relied on physical sales and the decline in tourism led to an urban to rural migration due to diminishing sales. Most of the artists were aware of the ocean, some were fishers, and they produce ocean art when commissioned. In the focus group discussions, the artists attributed the popularity of wildlife and terrestrial themes to the fact that tourists visit national parks and encounter more animals on land than they do in the sea. Religious barriers and lack of ocean knowledge were also cited as reasons for the low uptake of ocean art. The review of the CIDP for the two counties showed greater investments in creative arts in Mombasa County with support for the inclusion of youth and women in culture and creative arts, development of a County cultural and creative arts centre as well as the organization of open air markets for tourists. The CIDP for Kilifi provided investments in film making and sports for the youth.

Conclusion
Our study was undertaken along the coast yet we found ocean and marine art ranked lower in popularity and generated low sales compared to art with terrestrial and wildlife themes. This is attributed to the high investment on safari tourism on land and terrestrial conservation in Kenya. Barriers to the purchase of ocean art by locals were identified as a lack of awareness of the ocean, religious barriers and purchasing power of locals. Art sales are highly dependent on foreign tourists and contribute significantly to the coastal Blue Economy. Our study identified opportunities to enhance familiarity with the ocean which include policy interventions at the level of the County Governments that could support artists and art sales on digital platforms, ocean literacy in schools as well as opening up ocean spaces to enhance encounters with the sea.