

Learning from the wisdom and challenges of the Togean Islands

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The Togean Islands, located in the heart of Tomini Bay, Central Sulawesi, are more than just a beautiful tropical archipelago. This region is one of the world's centres of marine biodiversity, home to coral reefs, seagrass beds, and vast mangrove forests. Behind its beauty lies a valuable story about the struggles of local communities and conservation challenges that teach us valuable lessons about how to harmonise human relationships with the surrounding environment.

The abundance paradox: Wealth under threat

The Togean people living in the villages of Pulau Enam, Kabalutan, and Tiga Pulau are highly dependent on the sea for their survival. The sea is their market, their food source, and their identity. Based on the results of the perception mapping report of the project *Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN Region* or the ASEAN ENMAPS Project, there is a “paradox of abundance.” This ecologically rich region is actually showing a downward trend in fish stock.



Perception mapping exercise in Togean Islands, Central Sulawesi

Old fishermen who have been fishing for more than 20 years always tell stories of how fish could still be easily caught without having to travel far, and how other marine life—such as green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*), dugongs (*Dugong dugon*), giant clams (*Tridacna* spp.), sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*), and Napoleon fish (*Cheilinus undulatus*)—could regularly be spotted. These species are now difficult to find and their numbers have continued to decline over the past 20 years. The loss of these charismatic species is certainly a warning sign of ecological imbalance.

Nowadays, fishermen have to travel long distances just to find fish. Compounded by skyrocketing fuel costs, fishermen are facing severe financial strain due to unstable incomes and mounting livelihood uncertainty. This serves as a reminder that uncontrolled exploitation will burden the community's economy in the future.

The dangers behind “compressor hoses” and fish bombs

One of the biggest challenges in Togean is destructive fishing practices, such as the use of bombs, cyanide, and compressor hoses. Compressor hoses are often used to catch octopus and lobster in deep coral reefs.

These practices carry three risks:

- **Health**—Risk of paralysis and even death for divers due to inhaling dirty compressor air at depth.
- **Environment**—Permanent damage to coral structures that take decades to regrow.
- **Economy**—Loss of habitat for productive fish that should be a source of fry for the surrounding area.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that these fishermen are essentially heads of families who are caught between the need to earn a living and sustainability, the value of which



Women's consultation in Kabalutan Village, Togean Islands, Central Sulawesi

seems abstract when their stomachs are empty. As long as no real alternatives are offered, these practice will only become more hidden, not less prevalent. Therefore, more concrete efforts are needed to phase out this practice by offering access to capital, knowledge, or safer fishing technology.

Local knowledge and women's strength

In marine conservation, the focus is often placed solely on the men who fish. However, Togean women play an equally crucial role in the economic chain, handling everything from post-harvest processing and salting, to marketing marine products. The division of roles in Togean is quite clear, creating gender balance in the traditional fishing ecosystem. Men use their capabilities to search for and catch fish in the open sea, while women use their expertise in processing fishery products.

In addition to women, there are also indigenous communities who still possess traditional knowledge about seasonal patterns and fish spawning locations with remarkable accuracy. This knowledge has been passed down through generations and forms part of the local wisdom treasured around Togean. These communities are key to maintaining the balance of the sea, which requires harmony between local knowledge and modern knowledge.

Youth groups are also at the forefront of sustainable conservation practices, because they are the ones who will become the backbone of their families and the guardians of the sea in the future. Their understanding of conservation today will determine the future of conservation efforts in Togean.

Ultimately, successful conservation must be inclusive of decision-making in a region by involving all parties, including women, indigenous peoples, and youth in governance arrangements, and integrating local wisdom into national park regulations. This has proven to be more effective in building a sense of ownership of the region than simply implementing regulations without a community basis.

Transformation: From restrictions to recovery

Many communities were initially concerned about the implementation of the marine conservation area (MCA) concept because they thought it would restrict their fishing areas, but this was successfully overcome through a perception mapping approach that shifted their perspective. The community began to understand that MCA functions as a “savings account” where fish can safely reproduce, thereby increasing their population and spreading to fishing areas.

By using visual tools such as participatory maps and group discussions, explanations to the community became much more effective than mere technical lectures. When the community understands why an area is protected, they become the front line in protecting that area. Traditionally, socialisation has often taken the form of rigid presentations—full of technical terms, with minimal dialogue and participation. The participatory approach reverses all of this logic: the community is no longer the object of lectures, but rather a source of information that is listened to. The result is clear: they no longer simply obey the rules, but have transformed conservation rules from an obligation into a source of pride. When that pride grows, no fish bomb explodes without someone reporting it.

The journey of conservation in the Togean Islands teaches us that protecting the sea means protecting everything within it: biodiversity, customs, communities, and even the geography. The future of Togean does not depend solely on government regulations, but on collaboration between science, policy, and the honest voices of coastal communities who interact with the waves every day. Let us protect this “Paradise in Togean,” because every coral reef that is destroyed and every fish that is lost is a loss of hope for future generations.

This article has been reviewed to ensure gender-inclusive and empowering language.

The project *Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN region (ASEAN ENMAPS)* aims to improve marine protected area network management in key Large Marine Ecosystems across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. It applies science-based strategies to conserve biodiversity and sustain fisheries. The project also aims to strengthen governance, build the capacity of stakeholders, promote knowledge sharing, and advance sustainable financing for long-term conservation. ASEAN ENMAPS is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme through the funding of the Global Environment Facility, and with the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity as the executing agency.

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