

# Foreword

Until relatively recent times, the coastal regions of insular Southeast Asia have had the elastic ability to absorb a variety of transient fishing populations from other islands who then within a generation or so assimilate to a new, more fluid ethnic identity. As new technologies have enabled fishing populations to expand ever further in search of lucrative fishing grounds, movement to new settlement areas and the amount of inter-island traffic and fish exports have increased apace. These processes are especially common in the Philippines, and Palawan in the west-central part of the archipelago has attracted many migrant groups in recent decades. As Michael Fabinyi makes clear in his book, *Fishing for Fairness*, the political and economic construction of Palawan as the 'final frontier' and an ecological oasis in the country's overall environmentally damaged set of natural resources, exists in an uneasy tension with the provincial government's strategy of mineral extraction and economic development.

In recent decades, maritime anthropology has really become applied environmental anthropology as national and international efforts to improve the management of marine resources have taken a more interdisciplinary direction. One of the most important ethnographic contributions of such research has been the documentation of existing forms of sea tenure and other territorial forms of dividing up human access to marine resources. A second area of ethnographic contribution concerns the documentation of community-based natural resource management and co-management projects wherein coastal fishers, traders, governments, and often non-governmental organisations design, implement and monitor the use of coastal resources. The relatively poor success record in the Philippines of many of these projects is a theme of this book, as Fabinyi makes the case that unless we understand the narratives and meanings different sets of actors attach to political or environmental initiatives, the effective design of conservation projects are likely to fail—especially if effective alternative livelihood projects are not implemented.

This book is a major contribution to environmental anthropology generally and to political anthropology in the Philippines especially. Despite several decades of global efforts to stop environmental degradation and biodiversity loss in the country, most maritime conservation schemes have failed or, at best, only partially succeeded. Much anthropological literature has corrected Garrett Hardin's critique of open access resources by noting that he confused open access resources with restricted access resources and omitted any consideration of cultural norms and social institutions that might constrain over-exploitation (see McCay and Acheson 1987; Anderson and Simmons 1993; Dyer and McGoodwin 1994). In contrast, Fabinyi's post-structural ecology approach fits into a more recent set of approaches that seek to understand the rhetorics and

practices that surround debates about environmental projects from a variety of different perspectives. Here the emphasis is on how such rhetorics and discursive conflicts serve different interest groups and shape institutions, environmental actions, and ways of life (see Greenough and Tsing 2003).

Drawing on cultural insights from a range of scholars specialising in the Philippines, the author highlights how the local conceptions of small-scale fishers of Coron in the Calamianes Islands are expressed through a rhetoric or discourse that equates their fishing practices with legality, morality and self-assessment of their neutral impact on the environment. This politicised rhetoric is formed in a discursive contestation with an opposed image of wealthy fishers associated with illegal fishing practices, immorality and relative impunity from government regulation—in part because they can avoid arrest by paying bribes. Small-scale fishers' construction of wealthy fishers in this way serves as an active campaign of resistance and an effort to prevent government regulation of their extractive practices. Drawing on the 'right to survive' ethics that often color the discourse between the poor and the wealthy in the Philippines, Fabinyi calls this rhetoric 'the discourse of the poor moral fisher'. In a stunning revocation of provincial government efforts to institute a closed season for the live fish trade in the Calamianes, Fabinyi carefully shows how such rhetorics and alliances between small-scale fishers, live fish traders and municipal politicians effectively repelled the provincial regulations. The pro-conservation, provincial politicians were seen by local-level fishers as enveloped within a wider framework that presents almost all actions of fisheries governance as anti-poor and corrupt.

By illustrating his ethnography with a careful review of the work of such scholars as Fanella Cannell, Rey Iletto, and Vicente Rafael concerning how power is conceptualised by marginalised groups in the Philippines, this book contributes rich material to understanding the creative micro-politics and practices surrounding environmental discourses. Rather than examine how cultural norms and sanctions exist to protect certain environmental measures, he instead shows how a culturally constructed image of the larger political economy itself constrains the effective implementation of conservation measures. Fabinyi firmly locates inshore fishers faced with the introduction of marine protected areas within a 'rights-based discourse' that absolves them of responsibility for certain quasi-legal forms of fishing undertaken by young men. He clearly illustrates how negotiable and culturally constructed forms of legality must be understood as embedded in a larger set of perceptions and debates that historically developed to govern relations between small capture fishers and wealthier fishers, traders, and local government officials who are expected to protect their constituents' rights to a livelihood.

Fabinyi makes three main ethnographic points that have public policy implications for the design of coastal resource management policies. First, concepts such

as ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ are culturally imbued and flexibly negotiated by very specific resource users according to different sets of resources. Second, marine protected areas are often not able to serve the interests of multiple stakeholders, in contrast to what has sometimes been claimed. Finally, the ‘realpolitik’ of marine resource management occurs within the discourse of ‘fairness’ and social justice and itself shapes the outcomes in ways that may undermine the goals of conservation and simply reproduce structures of political patronage. The discourse of morality and fairness toward the poor is a political platform poor people appeal to whenever they are faced with hardship. While patron-client relations are common in Southeast Asia, Fabinyi attributes the emphasis on morality in such appeals to the possible entrenched influence of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines.

This book is designed to be of use to policymakers as well as scholars, including practitioners involved in the implementation of marine resource conservation programs. As such, it is mercifully free of jargon or heavy theory, while providing a carefully nuanced and documented set of insights into the coastal politics of contemporary resource conflicts. By showing how the grievances of fishers are constrained and embedded in larger cultural idioms, Fabinyi’s book is a persuasive call for more careful ethnographic documentation both before and during the implementation of co-management projects. It is also a warning of the consequences of not doing so. Given the extreme challenges facing both contemporary fishers and environmental managers in coastal areas of the Philippines, this book is a sensitive but also sobering look at the choices ahead.

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## References

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