



Promoting Environmental Stewardship and Social Cohesion Between Host and Migrant Fishing Communities

Bahari Hai Organisation

is a not-for-profit marine conservation organization based in Watamu, Kilifi County, Kenya. The organization aims to support and strengthen the capacity of communities in the protection and sustainable management of marine ecosystems. In doing so, it works with a range of local stakeholders and partners including fishing communities and other community groups, government agencies and the private sector.

AREA AND SCOPE

Bahari Hai works with communities in 12 villages across Kilifi, Tana River and Lamu counties, partnering with local Beach Management Units and other civil society organizations. It focuses in particular on fishing communities who depend on the marine environment for their livelihood and lifestyle, and are the most direct and effective stewards and custodians of local natural resources.



CONTEXT

Watamu is home to the Watamu Marine National Park and Reserve, which is recognized as a Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In recent years, the adverse effects of climate change have significantly affected the Reserve. Increasing temperatures in shallow waters have resulted in the disappearance of microorganisms and seagrass, which fish rely on for food, protection, reproduction and nurseries. These climate impacts compound overfishing and other environmental challenges arising from unsustainable and illegal fishing practices, resulting in a shift in the number and diversity of fish and marine species. Locals largely rely on small-scale fishing for their livelihoods, and this shift in marine biodiversity and composition is reflected in what is sold at the market. While pufferfish, triggerfish, eels and wrasses were not commonly considered to hold a high market value, they are increasingly sold given the decline or complete disappearance of other species.

Moreover, while fish stocks in the southern part of the Kenyan coast are rapidly declining, those in the north remain abundant. As a result, fisherfolk increasingly migrate north in search of fish, often traveling long distances to Watamu from other parts of Kenya and even Tanzania. Such migration is usually seasonal, lasting from September/October to February/March, and this, coupled with the fact that many farmers turn to fishing during drought and the dry season, causes the size of the fishing community in Watamu and Kilifi County to swell on a regular basis. This puts increased pressure on marine resources, local markets and basic services in the area, contributing to social conflict and territorial disputes.

RESPONSES

Bahari Hai primarily engages with the fishing community through the Beach Management Units (BMUs). The BMUs are typically composed of fisherfolk, fishmongers and fishtraders, boat/vessel owners, and other stakeholders with special interests in the BMU. They have a very dynamic composition, with their members constantly changing as they move to reach their preferred fishing grounds, find other job opportunities, age or are affected by health issues. BMUs typically have 150 members, with larger ones counting over 700 individuals, and rely on a Committee, usually composed of 9 to 15 representatives from the different categories, for governance. BMUs typically cover at least 3, and sometimes over 10 fish landing sites. Through its subcommittees, the BMUs address a range of issues including patrolling and checking for illegal fishing practices, managing finances and licensing, conservation and environmental activities, conflict resolution and the provision of advisory services.



Data Collection and Analysis

“ The fish which have been caught over decades, which have always been found within the fishing grounds of small-scale fishers, are disappearing.”

Kahindi Changawa

Bahari Hai encourages the BMUs to collect data to understand how climate change impacts fish stocks. In doing so, the BMUs monitor which species are still available, their occurrence and distribution in different areas. Over time, Bahari Hai then provides data analysis support to try and identify the conditions that lead to



a relative abundance of fish stocks in the north (and relative scarcity in the south), and thereby the factors that contribute to the migration of fisherfolk. Following this analysis, BMUs are encouraged to establish measures to better protect and manage their fisheries.

Ecosystem Management

The organization also works with the BMUs to promote sustainable fishing practices and a sense of community ownership over the marine environment. Migrant fisherfolk are allowed to operate in the Reserve in the same way as local fisherfolk as long as they comply with the BMU policies (e.g. using sustainable artisanal fishing practices) and have a work permit. Bahari Hai has implemented a project called 'Fishing Gear Exchange', which encourages fisherfolk to exchange their illegal fishing gear for artisanal and sustainable fishing gear through the BMUs. This reduces turtle by-catch and prevents the depletion of fish stocks. Newcomers are also trained on sustainable fishing practices and members of the BMUs receive governance trainings that empower them to apply relevant rules and regulations for improved natural resource management.

Likewise, in order to address the adverse impacts of climate change and overfishing on fish stocks, the organization supports fishing communities in identifying and protecting fish breeding channels. This includes replenishing fish stocks in the areas, enforcing

prohibition on the use of illegal fishing gear, such as poison, mosquito nets, harpoons and spear guns, and sometimes prohibiting fishing altogether in the identified areas. In order to prevent unsustainable impacts to the communities, fisherfolk are provided with gear and canoes to be able to fish elsewhere and the protected areas are developed as ecotourism sites, to promote livelihood diversification for local communities.

Social Cohesion

The organization further collaborates with BMUs to promote social cohesion between migrant and host fishing communities. Specific procedures exist to regulate the influx of migrant fisherfolk: newcomers have to be acknowledged by their BMUs through a letter from their village chief directed to the chairperson of the BMU of destination. BMU representatives track how many migrant fisherfolk are coming in and what practices they are using. Bahari Hai's training and coordination allows them to better monitor the evolution, communicate with newcomers and liaise with other BMUs, reducing the risk of conflict. Moreover, training and orientation on fishing techniques and local regulations targeting migrant fisherfolk also reduces the risk of tension over overuse of resources and adoption of illegal fishing practices.



CHALLENGES

The arrival of migrant fisherfolk has several social implications including increased tension over dwindling resources. In contrast to the artisanal and small-scale practices employed by local fisherfolk, migrant fisherfolk often adopt unsustainable fishing practices, including the use of illegal fishing gear such as poison and spearguns. This enables them to catch more fish and sell them for lower prices, thus attracting local buyers. As a result, local fisherfolk feel compelled to also sell their fish at a reduced price. This often leads to conflict between local and migrant communities, particularly in areas where local fisherfolk feel dominated or outnumbered by migrant fisherfolk.

Depleting fish stocks have also led fisherfolk to engage in risky fishing practices that result in increased profits. For example, some fisherfolk risk their lives by fishing during the rainy season (June/July) so that they can catch hammerhead sharks, which come to the area seasonally and sell for high prices.

Finally, lack of data remains a challenge, particularly around which habitats are threatened by climate change, which ones are still intact, and which ones are vulnerable. Bahari Hai supports further research to fill these gaps.

RESULTS

Bahari Hai's work has been instrumental by engaging BMUs in ecosystem conservation and increasing local awareness and uptake of sustainable ecosystem management practices.

By early 2024, over

126 FISHERMEN

in Kilifi County had benefited from the fishing gear exchange project.

By early 2024, over 126 fishermen in Kilifi County had benefited from the fishing gear exchange project. They requested the legal fishing gear from Bahari Hai, handed over illegal gear and received new ones from the authorities.

Several channels in the area were closed to fishing in 2023, by initiative of local fisherfolk, to ensure the viability of nurseries and improve fish stocks in the areas. Despite conflicts among different interest groups, ultimately the areas were protected by the authorities, and there is today a high level of compliance with these decisions. Bahari Hai's technical support and capacity-building work were key to finding a compromise and encouraging fisherfolk to support the project.

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The PDD implements the project to “Avert, Minimize and Address Displacement Related to the Effects of Climate Change” (PAMAD) to assist countries and communities facing the challenges of Loss and Damage and Displacement. Under PAMAD, and in partnership with the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations on Disaster Reduction (GNDR), the PDD promotes peer-to-peer learning on effective responses to displacement and climate change in Kenya. The project is supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). For more information, visit <https://pamad.disasterdisplacement.org>



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