Co-management from the top? The roles of policy entrepreneurs and distributive conflict in developing co-management arrangements

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Abstract

This research examines attempts to develop co-management arrangements in the Maine lobster and Chesapeake Bay blue crab fisheries. It finds that the attributes of user groups and resources as well as government support are important in facilitating the development of co-management, but are not sufficient. This study highlights that the process of developing institutions for co-management is lengthy and time consuming and that user groups do not necessarily embrace changes to the status quo. I argue that the nature of distributional conflict and the affiliation of policy entrepreneurs account for variation in the development of co-management regimes in these cases.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, failures of top down approaches to fisheries management have come under scrutiny and the concept of co-management has gained increasing purchase [1–3]. Co-management—where “fishermen’s organizations take an active part in designing, implementing and enforcing fisheries regulations” [3, p. 138]—is practiced in advanced democracies in the Maine lobster fishery [1], Norway’s Lofoten fishery [4], and the Atlantic surf clam fishery [5] as well as a number of others [6].

Proponents of co-management argue that increased stakeholder input can lead to better management. They posit that a process that engages fishermen leads to greater procedural legitimacy and enhances the quality of regulations due to better information about the resource and distributional consequences of regulations [2,3]. Wilson argues that governments will be motivated to adopt co-management due to the “need for the communities help in dealing with aspects of fisheries management that require richer, more sensitive and subtle tools than authority” [7, p. 202]. However, researchers warn against seeing co-management as a panacea as problems with legitimacy and regulatory capture have emerged in some arenas [8–11].

In the past decades, there has been increasing scholarship examining the efficacy of co-management regimes [2,11] and how the characteristics of the community or the resource contribute to the likelihood of successful cooperation in overcoming collective action problems [12–15]. Implicit in this research is that, given certain resource and community attributes, fishermen will want to participate in co-management and hence the potential roadblocks in getting user groups to the table to discuss various options are under-examined. Indeed, researchers have found that certain communities have initiated the move to co-management by asking for, or in some cases demanding, an active role in policy decision-making [16,17]. In other cases, governments or the courts have initiated moves towards various forms of co-management which have been accepted, if not embraced, by the fishing community [18,19]. However, as much of the research examines the efficacy of these institutions after they have been established, there is scant attention to the processes through which affected groups have considered alternative approaches to fisheries management and changes in the