Social resilience in the Great Barrier Reef (resilience and conservation session)

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Abstract

Ultimately natural resource management is effected through influencing people and their behaviour. Restraints on human activities will be essential for the future effective functioning of natural resource systems and for the communities and industries dependent on them. Yet, the very same initiatives designed to sustain long term supply of a resource’s goods and services may also impose significant, and often immediate, pressures on communities and resource dependent industries. People with the capacity to adopt such initiatives may be able to support the resilience of the ecosystem and in turn contribute to the resilience of their community. People without this capacity, however, may be less able. Knowledge of the capacity that resource-dependent people might have to contribute to ecological resilience – and be socially resilient - will be important information for natural resource managers in their quest to attain sustainability.

In this presentation we present an approach for assessing and monitoring the capacity of people and industries dependent on a natural resource to be adaptive. We refer to the case of the Great Barrier Reef, Australia. The Great Barrier Reef is one of the most iconic natural systems in the world, yet it is under pressure from a range of threats, and these threaten the resilience of the people dependent upon it; the resilience of the people is dependent on the resilience of the Reef, and the resilience of the Reef is dependent on the resilience of the people.

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A Social and Economic Long Term Monitoring Program (SELTMP) has been implemented for the Great Barrier Reef, to observe, through time, the state of the human dimension of the Reef system. Its purpose is to inform management decisions that serve not only to maintain Reef resilience, but also that of the people dependent on it. The SELTMP has been designed to assist managers to understand and support the capacity of Reef-dependent people to undergo change and be resilient and this may be as important for effective Reef management as are efforts to build resilience of the ecosystem. In this way, the SELTMP hopes to contribute towards the implementation of Reef protection initiatives that maximize conservation goals and benefit people.

The SELTMP offers an opportunity to understand and monitor the growing threat of human actions in the region and the corresponding capacity of industries and communities to support ecosystem resilience. It offers Reef managers, industries and communities the opportunity to understand the human dimension of the region and its capacity to face climate change, environmental degradation, regulatory change, cultural change and other crises, including those affecting the global economy, health and political stability. It provides the potential to evaluate the effectiveness of management interventions and to assess equity dimensions within the region. In brief, it monitors social resilience.

Keywords: Adaptation to climate change, adaptive capacity, conservation, decision-making, frameworks, marine, protected area