Primitivism as an artistic approach to depict future scenarios: the case of Ciénaga Grande (Santa Marta, Colombia)

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Abstract

The Ciénaga Grande of Santa Marta is the most important coastal complex of the Caribbean in Colombia, which is inhabited mostly by fishermen and small farmers. The current context suggests that significant changes will be presented mainly associated with infrastructure projects and economic development, creating great uncertainty about the social and environmental impact on the social-ecological system. In this context, we conducted a participatory future scenario planning exercise for creating shared spaces where participants can debate and discuss and from which we can achieve a shared vision of the current situation and future scenarios. In doing so, we performed five focus groups in different municipalities of the social-ecological system. As a result of the focus groups, we created four different scenarios on the basis of the effect of different drivers of change and institutional context –i.e., business as usual, development of eco-technologies, application of the Biosphere Reserve’s norms, and a control desired scenario-. The future scenarios were called (except for the business as usual one) as ‘Productive and technological future’, ‘Sustainable mosaic’, and ‘Searching the desired future’, respectively. In each of the designed scenarios, participants assessed the effect of the drivers behind the scenario on (i) the ecosystem services delivery, (ii) the state of human wellbeing of different stakeholders at different spatial scales (local and regional-national), and (iii) the potential social conflicts emerging.

In addition, each scenario in each focus group was drawn by participants on the basis of their perception about the consequences of the drivers of change on the biodiversity, ecosystem services, human wellbeing, and institutions. These pictures represent the stakeholders’ mental models and visions about the plausible futures of the social-ecological system. The collective drawing exercise showed us which key ecological and social elements were highlighted in each of the municipalities by participants. The explanations regarding pictures were recorded by the research team.
On the basis of these pictures (and also on the recordings), we requested the collaboration of Pedro Mendoza, a primitivist painter who lives in the study area, for the illustration of the two most opposite future scenarios (i.e. Business as usual and Sustainable mosaic). We believe that these paintings are an appropriate mechanism to synthesize all the participatory work made by local stakeholders, while at the same time, ensure the effective communication with them as a result of the traditional elements depicted. These two paintings reflect the contrasting plausible futures by making emphasis on landscape changes, biodiversity status, cultural diversity and economic activities, as well as social cohesion.

We conclude that the inclusion of drawing exercises in the participatory scenario planning technique can be a useful tool for representing the stakeholders’ perceptions and visions, as well as for promoting the discussion among the stakeholders about the consequences of current drivers of change on the ecosystems, the services they deliver, and human wellbeing. On the other hand, the primitivism paintings can help to reach a social agreement about which future scenario is more desirable and to highlight the traditional knowledge of local stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Community engagement, Conflict, Dialog, Ecosystem services, Participation, Planning, Scenario analysis, Social, ecological systems, Stakeholder engagement