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# Visible Impacts, Invisible Structures: Marginalization and Resistance in Coastal Fishing Communities

## A Case Study of Small-scale Fisherfolk on Malapascua Island, Philippines

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# Abstract

Marine resource degradation and competition over fish stocks have marginalized small-scale fisherfolk, yet studies rarely examine how tourism and commercial fishing intersect in this process. This case study explores how power asymmetries and marginalization affect the livelihoods of small-scale fisherman on Malapascua Island, Philippines. Malapascua, a small island in Central Visayas, is home to a famous dive site for Thresher Sharks but also faces fishing pressure from commercial fishers. A neo-Marxist and actor-oriented political ecology framework is used to identify political processes shaping the natural resources small-scale fisherfolk depend on. Through this framework, material, institutional and structural power is linked to processes of economic, ecological and political-economic marginalization. Small-scale fisherfolk face competition from commercial fishermen with greater capital and political ties, while eco-tourism's higher economic output leads to its prioritization over fisherfolk needs. Structural power shaping institutions enables prioritization based on economic value. This political-economic marginalization has adverse economic and ecological consequences for small-scale fisherfolk that reinforce their political invisibility. A fish sanctuary managed by local fisherfolk has the potential to aid in regaining agency and power, challenging the cycle of marginalization.

*Key words*: Malapascua Island, Philippines, Small-Scale Fisherfolk, Marginalization, Power Asymmetries, Political Ecology

Words: 9,992

*“Every day is a learning journey, you know…But if we give ourselves the chance to embrace that learning, no? Every day is something brilliant—something others dream of, but they cannot. They are not given the chance to meet this kind of community, to go as far as we have known. So we are very grateful, even if it's a small or big experience. We are very grateful that every day has a new beginning, a new learning in our journey—that we could, even just a small pinch of knowledge, contribute to the community." (Interview 1)*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research Problem

Island nations across the Indian and Pacific Oceans are among the most deeply impacted by the degradation of marine ecosystems, as the ocean is central not only to subsistence and economic activity but also to local cultural identity (Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Muallil et al., 2013). The depletion of fish stocks and biodiversity loss directly threaten the sustainability of small-scale fisheries, with this environmental decline largely driven by intensified fishing efforts, weak regulatory frameworks, pollution, and economic pressures such as tourism (Ballad et al., 2022; Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Muallil et al., 2013; Newell et al., 2019) Compounding these issues, climate change presents an escalating risk, manifesting through coral bleaching, reduced coral cover, and increasingly severe tropical storms which further undermine the marine environments fishing communities depend on (Gardner et al., 2020; Muallil et al., 2013). Among these island nations in the region, in the Philippines alone, it is estimated that 10 million Filipinos rely directly on small-scale artisanal fisheries for their livelihood and subsistence (PepSea, 2016). Despite the continued importance of fishing, the sustainability of the industry faces significant challenges. Most notably, declining fish stocks, competition from commercial vessels, restricted access due to marine protected areas, and the growing impacts of climate change (Muallil et al., 2013). In response, more and more fishers have become involved in sustainable fishing and marine conservation initiatives.

Malapascua, a small island in the central Philippines, was previously reliant entirely on fishing but has experienced a touristic boom in recent decades. However, this rapid growth of tourism has contributed to a number of environmental as well as socio-economic challenges on the island. Waste management has become a serious issue (van der Graaf, 2017), and human activities from ecotourism have increased stress on the marine ecosystems at the dive and snorkeling sites (Jaloustre, 2016). Despite tourism having become the dominant economic force, many families continue to depend exclusively on fishing as their main source of income (PepSea, 2022). While the tourism industry has introduced a multitude of new employment opportunities and economic benefits for the community, the influx of foreign businesses has

created a significant wealth gap between the tourism business owners and fishing sectors. Furthermore, governmental prioritization of the tourism industry has caused significant strain for the fishing community. This has been recently evidenced by a lack of governmental cooperation in the fishers' efforts to establish a fish sanctuary.

## 1.2 Research Aims and Question

This thesis aims to understand the power dynamics that are underlying these problems as well as the scalar levels at which they occur. Furthermore, it seeks to link these power relations to ongoing processes of marginalization of the fisherfolk, a dynamic engaged with by a local NGO but not yet explored in academic literature on Malapascua. Therefore, the following research question will guide the research: ***"How are multi-level power asymmetries marginalizing the fisherfolk community on Malapascua Island?"***

The theoretical framework employed is based on a combination of neo-Marxist and actor-oriented perspectives on political ecology. This approach enables the identification of power structures and the ways in which different actors exercise power, revealing how these dynamics lead to the marginalization of the fisherfolk. Here, the focus is on material, structural, and institutional power.

## 1.3 Thesis Outline

In chapter two, some background information includes the invisibility of small-scale fisherfolk, the impact of commercial fishing and international fishing pressures on their livelihoods, their position within the Philippines Fishery Code, and the impact of eco-tourism on the natural environment and socioeconomic position of small-scale fisherfolk. This is followed by a literature review highlighting unequal power relations between them, state and non-state actors, and the interplay between eco-tourism or commercial fishermen and small-scale fisherfolk livelihoods. Chapter four, the theoretical framework, introduces political ecology with its focus on power and power asymmetries as a framework for the discussion section. In the methodology section, the case study, the data collection, the thematic data analysis, as well as limitations and

ethical considerations are described. Chapter six introduces the socio-economic, political, environmental, and spatial impacts described in the interviews that resulted from the analysis. In the discussion section, sources of power, how they are exercised, and the outcomes in the form of marginalizations that small-scale fisherfolk face are presented based on the visible impacts analyzed in the previous chapter. Lastly, the eighth chapter concludes the thesis and lays out future avenues of research.

# 2 Background

## 2.1 Small-Scale Fisherfolk

Small-scale fisherfolk, whose livelihoods are deeply tied to marine ecosystems, face growing marginalization and vulnerability amid intensifying resource extraction, shifting environmental policies, and uneven development priorities. (Andriesse et al., 2021; Bennett, 2019; Bush & Marschke, 2016; Campling et al., 2012; Fabinyi et al., 2019) Fisherfolk occupy a weaker position within national political-geographical and political-economic systems, receiving less recognition, fewer subsidies, and limited access to government agricultural extension programs (Andriesse et al., 2021). Marine resources are inherently more difficult to govern than terrestrial ones due to their fluid, expansive nature and the absence of fixed, physical boundaries, which complicates regulation, enforcement, and tenure systems (Campling et al., 2012). While much focus has been on land frontiers, coastal frontiers, which are politically, economically, and ecologically connected, are also undergoing rapid changes, yet coastal fishers remain largely invisible and excluded from these frontier narratives compared to agrarian smallholders (Fabinyi et al., 2019).

## 2.2 Fishing Pressures

Small-scale fisheries across Southeast Asia (SEA) face intense fishing pressures exacerbated by overfishing, illegal fishing, and competition from large-scale commercial fisheries (Bush & Marschke, 2016). Over 75% of global fisheries are at or beyond full exploitation, and SEA is no exception (Campling et al., 2012). The rise in global seafood demand, especially from growing economies in the region (most notably China) and regional trade agreements have intensified resource extraction in coastal frontier zones, including many parts of the Philippines (Fabinyi et al., 2019). Small-scale fishers are marginalized amid this economic expansion, with their access to marine resources challenged by more powerful industrial operators and foreign fishing fleets (Bush & Marschke, 2016). In the Philippines, approximately 1.21 million people are employed directly in fisheries, with about six million dependent on these resources

(Andriesse et al., 2021). The intensification of fishing efforts, combined with insufficient enforcement of fisheries regulations, leads to declining fish catches and threatens the livelihoods of small-scale fishers (Andriesse et al., 2021; Bush & Marschke, 2016).

## 2.3 Marine and Fisheries Governance

### 2.3.1 Marine Protected Areas

Environmental governance of small-scale fisheries in SEA has primarily been centered around Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), especially in the Philippines, with over 1,600 locally managed MPAs – the most worldwide (Bush & Marschke, 2016; Muallil et al., 2019). By Philippine law, a **Marine Protected Area (MPA)** is a clearly defined coastal or marine space managed to conserve biodiversity and sustain fisheries, often including no-take zones and community-based co-management (Republic Act, 2017). **Fish sanctuaries** are another form of MPA as "a designated area where fishing or other forms of activities which may damage the ecosystem of the area is prohibited and human access may be restricted" (Philippine Fisheries Code, 1998, p.7). This approach attempts to safeguard fish populations from as much human contact as possible. In the Philippines, coral reef fisheries management often faces challenges due to ineffective governance of most MPAs, which frequently adopt Western conservation frameworks misaligned with local socio-political realities (Pajaro et al., 2010). Only 32 of 101 MPAs established between 1978 and 1981 remained functional by 2005 (Muallil et al., 2019).

### 2.3.2 Legal Prioritization of Municipal Fisherfolk

In the Philippines, a **small-scale or municipal fisher** is defined as someone using boats no larger than 3 gross tons or no boat at all, fishing within municipal waters (within 15km of the shoreline), which are to be **prioritized for their exclusive use** to support local livelihoods and sustainable resource use (Philippine Fisheries Code, 1998). This law emphasizes the protection of municipal fisherfolk by giving them **preferential access to municipal waters** and prioritizing their **rights in resource use** (Philippine Fisheries Code, 1998). Furthermore, support to municipal fisherfolk shall be provided, aiming to improve their livelihoods and

promote sustainable fishing practices (Republic Act, 2017). It underscores the State's responsibility to conserve biodiversity and protect ecosystems, including through the mobilization of resources and scientific support. It also stresses the importance of local culture and Indigenous practices in environmental governance.

Decentralization and local participation alongside capacity-building and technical support are key to MPA success, but problems arise when local governments lack such capacity or when conflicts regarding fishing boundaries and resource access persist (Andriesse et al., 2021; Pajaro et al., 2010). Governance is further complicated by the state's competing interests between fishers, industrial operators, and conservation, often privileging wealthier actors (Bush & Marschke, 2016; Campling et al., 2012). Weak enforcement alongside political and economic pressures undermine sustainability and fuel social inequities (Andriesse et al., 2021; Bush & Marschke, 2016).

## 2.4 Eco-Tourism

Eco-tourism has grown significantly in coastal Southeast Asia and the Philippines, linked closely to MPAs and conservation efforts (Bush & Marschke, 2016; Pajaro et al., 2010). Coastal areas near tourism hubs often receive better enforcement and protection due to their economic value, sometimes at the expense of small-scale fishers who face restricted access to traditional fishing grounds (Bush & Marschke, 2016). MPAs with tourism potential attract patrolling resources and investment but can generate conflicts by excluding local fishers and disrupting livelihoods if not managed inclusively (Bush & Marschke, 2016; Pajaro et al., 2010). In the Philippines, balancing biodiversity protection with community livelihood needs remains difficult, with local fishers often alienated from benefits derived from tourism-focused MPAs (Pajaro et al., 2010). Effective eco-tourism requires integrating community participation and equitable benefit-sharing to avoid exacerbating marginalization and to promote sustainable livelihoods beyond fishing (Andriesse et al., 2021).

# 3 Literature Review

## 3.1 Commercial Fishing

The majority of literature on small-scale fishermen, marginalization, and in some cases, political ecology has focused on the impact of commercial fishing and similar capitalist-driven activities on small-scale fishermen. In Ghana, Ayilu et al. (2023) examine how industrial fishing stakeholders are favored by the powerful elite and enjoy more influence and power than small-scale fisheries, who are continuously excluded and marginalized from marine resources. Similar to this, Nolan (2019) observes that foreign industrial trawlers have greatly overfished the marine resources on the Ghanaian coast and the small-scale fishermen are left with these consequences as they try to survive on the little resources left. On top of this, the wealthy elite with political connections have the necessary gear and capital to increase their wealth while the small-scale fishermen are forced to use destructive fishing practices for survival (Nolan, 2019).

Bush and Marschke (2016) find that market relations in SEA, where the industrial fishers enjoy a more privileged and powerful position, are influencing patterns of exploitation of the powerless. On top of this, the less powerful often receive higher fishing restrictions and are the scapegoat for environmental degradation and resource scarcity (Bush & Marschke, 2016). In the Philippines, Andriesse et al. (2021) have identified illegal commercial fishing to hinder small-scale fisherfolk from escaping the marginalization they experience, as enforcement mechanisms are weak and commercial fishermen have greater economic and political power to leverage. Fabinyi et al. (2019) have conducted an access analysis that underscores the importance of material resources (wealth) for preferential access to marine resources and the ability for greater wealth generation through fishing activities. They also observe that fishermen in more precarious positions, which lack the necessary capital, struggle to escape their vulnerable economic position (Fabinyi et al., 2019).

## 3.2 Tourism and MPAs

Another point of tension previous literature has examined is the political ecology of tourism development and the consequences for small-scale fishers in the Philippines (Oracion et al., 2005). While the development of the tourism sector through the establishment of an MPA offers initial economic benefits, the power inequalities between small-scale fishers and resort operators also carry the inherent threat of marginalization and exclusion of fishers (Oracion et al., 2005). Diverging goals of aesthetic conservation (tourism) and extractive conservation (fisheries) and the greater monetary power of the tourism businesses ultimately leads to an exclusion of fishermen from certain fishing grounds to their economic disadvantage (Oracion et al., 2005). Goals of biodiversity conservation stemming from regional or national levels need to be inclusive of the needs of everyone in the local community to avoid exacerbating inequalities (Oracion et al., 2005).

## 3.3 Multi-Level Governance Weaknesses and Corruption

Emphasis within the literature is generally on multi-scalar interactions and consequences of unequal relations of power between state actors and non-state actors that undermine the livelihoods of marginalized small-scale fishers and inhibit the possibility of sustainable transformation (Fernandez, 2007). Different priorities such as conservation goals versus livelihood improvements and empowerment can create tensions between these actors and lead to adverse outcomes (Fernandez, 2007; Mosepele & and Kolawole, 2017). The marginality of fisherfolk in Botswana is fundamentally tied to the prioritization of conservation as they lack the financial and political assets and power to create greater visibility for their needs (Mosepele & and Kolawole, 2017). Such tensions and unequal power relations are further exacerbated by the normalization of bribery and corruption in a regulatory environment (Tan-Mullins, 2007). Local enforcement, governance and coordination is then not based on regulations but on personal interest and those without the means to offer bribes are overlooked (Tan-Mullins, 2007). This has a great impact on the access of marine and coastal resources by small-scale fishermen (Tan-Mullins, 2007).

# 4 Theoretical Framework

## 4.1 Political Ecology

The origins of political ecology can be traced to the 1970s when researchers used the term to explain the connection between the environment and political economy (Khan, 2013; Paulson et al., 2003). Prior, most explanations of ecological changes and disturbances stemmed from neo-Malthusian thoughts that focused on demographic factors and eco-scarcity that cast blame on overpopulation and suggested population control, especially in the Global South (Bryant, 1998, 2001; Khan, 2013). Yet, this apolitical character of analyzing and approaching ecological crises led to the development of the opposing thoughts of political ecology that stresses linkages between the political economy and changes in social and environmental systems (Bennett, 2019; Bryant, 1998, 2001; Khan, 2013; Paulson et al., 2003; Svarstad et al., 2018; Watts, 2015). Within political ecology the environment is understood as being politicized and irrevocably connected to political and economic processes through various dynamics (Bennett, 2019; Bryant, 1998; Castree, 2015; Khan, 2013). Such connections are created through unequal power relations that shape socio-ecological systems, how they interact with each other and struggles they are facing (Bryant, 1998; Khan, 2013; Svarstad et al., 2018). Political ecology thus questions "simplistic notions about society and nature by exposing the social and ecological ramifications of political, economic, and cultural power" (Bryant, 2001, p.167).

### 4.1.1 Neo-Marxist Political Ecology

In the 1970s and 1980s, the field was dominated by neo-Marxist thinkers that put emphasis on struggles about control over and access to natural resources within capitalist structures, the marginalization of people due to power imbalances and class inequalities, and Marx's concept of production in relation to power (Bryant, 2001; Khan, 2013; Paulson et al., 2003; Svarstad et al., 2018; Watts, 2015). They highlight how local production relations, i.e. the usage and control of natural resources are integrated in a global structure that through power determines who can exploit natural resources and extract surplus for their gain (Bryant, 2001; Khan, 2013; Svarstad

et al., 2018; Watts, 2015). This extends to conservation areas that, from a neo-Marxist political ecology perspective, can often times be seen as a form of primitive accumulation where the local population is dispossessed and excluded from natural resources they traditionally had access to and where the commons turned into enclosed areas to benefit Western notions of conservation (Kelly, 2013; Svarstad et al., 2018).

### 4.1.2 Critique and Actor-Oriented Political Ecology

In the 1990s, political ecology broadened as critiques of the neo-Marxist perspective emerged (Bryant, 2001; Watts, 2015). Mostly, the rather deterministic nature of structures that neo-Marxism emphasizes has been criticized as underestimating the agency of less powerful actors in resisting these structures or the agency of the state in pursuing its heterogeneous interests that may not adhere to powerful capitalist structures (Bryant, 1998, 2001; Khan, 2013). Its narrow focus on politics and economics in understanding environmental issues has also been the focus of criticism as it shifts the focus away from the environment (Bryant, 2001). In addition, neo-Marxist thought focuses on material power and leaves non-material powers such as politics, gendered structures or discourses out of its analysis (Khan, 2013).

One of the emerging approaches highlights the role of agency and actors within political ecology and their exercise of power (Svarstad et al., 2018). In comparison to the neo-Marxist perspective this actor-oriented approach stresses the intentionality behind exercising power all while not negating the existence of structures that might hinder or enable this exercise of power (Svarstad et al., 2018). Such an exercise requires at least two actors that have different means of getting access to power, with means relating mostly to various forms of capital such as economic structures, social relations and discursive resources (Svarstad et al., 2018).

### 4.1.3 Themes within Political Ecology

Broadly, within the political ecology literature there are four themes that authors focus on, namely power and politics, narratives and knowledge, scale and place, and environmental justice and conflict (Bennett, 2019). Literature focused on power analyses the different sources of power, the means of exercising power and what the exercise of power or the inability thereof leads to (Bennett, 2019). Narratives are understood as tools that shape what is perceived as

reality or can be used to resist more dominant narratives (Bennett, 2019). The production and application of knowledge in decision-making and what kind of knowledge is prominently used as well as the interconnectedness of local environmental struggles with global structures and actors and the scales at which interactions and power struggles occur are persistently redefined through narratives or knowledge (Bennett, 2019). Through the various scales of interaction, causes of environmental crises may be removed from their place of emergence (Bennett, 2019). Lastly, unequal power relations related to discrepancies in place of origin and emergence or in unequal class relations may create environmental injustice and conflict (Bennett, 2019). Within environmental justice, concerns of recognition, inclusion in procedures or distributional effects of burdens and profits can be found throughout the literature (Bennett, 2019).

## 4.2 Operationalization

### 4.2.1 Neo-Marxist and Actor-Oriented Framework

Based on the above presented theoretical literature the thesis will utilize a neo-Marxist perspective in combination with an actor-oriented perspective to best capture underlying power relations and their effects. The neo-Marxist framework allows the recognition of structures of power relations and relations of production that are shaped by the capitalist system and class inequalities (Bryant, 1998, 2001; Khan, 2013; Svarstad et al., 2018; Watts, 2015). It aids in understanding how structures enable or hinder access to and control over resources, not just on a local but also on a global level (Watts, 2015). This also sheds light on the commercialization of societies and the processes of primitive accumulation of natural resources that exclude previous users of natural resources, while exposing communities to market dynamics and external resource control (Kelly, 2013; Watts, 2015). This capital accumulation that is often restricted to more powerful actors thus also creates power inequalities that lead to marginalization which the neo-Marxist perspective helps to identify (Svarstad et al., 2018).

To not overemphasize the central role of structures, the actor-oriented approach allows the analysis of involved actors and how they exercise power successfully or fail to do so within the structures (Svarstad et al., 2018). Agency and structure are not two separate determinants of power but closely interconnected and influence each other in exercises of power (Ahlborg &

Nightingale, 2018; Murray & Burrows, 2017). Together, the neo-Marxist and the actor-oriented approaches thus allow a thorough analysis of how a politicized environment shapes everyday lives of people through power relations and empowers or marginalizes them, while not negating the role actors actively play to create or resist these (Bryant, 1998; Watts, 2015).

### 4.2.2 Power Framework

With an inherent focus on power in political ecology it is important to establish a framework to analyze and discuss power relations identified on Malapascua Island and how they influence environmental governance, and the everyday lives of people immersed in and dependent on the environment there. For the purpose of this thesis, power is treated as a "social relation built on an asymmetrical distribution of resources and risks" (Hornberg, 2001 in Paulson et al., 2003, p.209). This definition emphasizes the relational properties of power, as power is not held by actors but rather "produced in encounters between spaces, actors, discourses, institutions, knowledges and practices, across multiple levels" (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018, p.387). It is thus important to analyze the source of the power exercised, the matter in which it is exercised and what the outcomes of this are (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018; Murray & Burrows, 2017).

Based on the literature, material power, institutional power and structural power as sources of power were identified to be of importance for the purpose of this thesis. Material power, central to neo-Marxist political ecology, describes "differences among actors/groups in terms of control over, and access to, natural resources" (Murray & Burrows, 2017, p.764) focusing on the material aspects (i.e. capital, technology) of this control. Institutional power describes the informal and formal rules that shape power relations and the struggle over resources (Murray & Burrows, 2017). The third source of power, structural power, refers to the ability of structures to influence institutional contexts or other systems to benefit certain actors, as often described in neo-Marxist literature where powerful structures shape actors' decisions and agency (Svarstad et al., 2018). The matter of exercising power by actors can be done in a direct and coercive way or indirectly through setting a framework and is also dependent on the structure of constitutive power within which the actors act (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018).

### 4.2.3 Marginalization

In this thesis, the last part of the power framework concerning the outcomes of power exercises describes forms of marginalization that may arise. Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) define three different forms of marginalization in the context of political ecology that have distinct forms but are interrelated. Economic marginalization describes the intensification of natural resources use (e.g. land) that ultimately leads to its loss in economic output (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Similarly, ecological marginalization describes the bare minimum of natural conditions that allow the natural resource to survive (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Lastly, political-economic marginalization "concerns the effect on people as well as on their productive activities of on-going changes within society at local and global levels" (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987, p.21). Included here are forms of spatial, social and political marginalization (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Through this framework, power relations which marginalize the fisherfolk on Malapascua Island can be identified as well as analyzed how they exercise agency and resist structures.

# 5 Methodology

## 5.1 Research Design

This thesis is based on qualitative research methods, with data primarily derived from field interviews, alongside government documents from the Philippines. Qualitative research methodology was chosen based on the objectives of the research, which revolve around the understanding of lived experiences of specific groups and social phenomena in a holistic approach, where observations and data gathered are largely abstract or otherwise not quantifiable (Lichtman, 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016; Walliman, 2006).

### 5.1.1 Researcher Roles

This thesis was co-authored by Alexander Chase Flanagan and Serena Frost, who collaborated closely throughout all stages of the research process. Each researcher contributed distinct but complementary strengths to the project.

Researcher Flanagan was responsible for fieldwork in conjunction with a local Filipino NGO, People and the Sea (PepSea), which included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic engagement with coastal fishing communities. His role focused on collecting first-hand data and developing an understanding of local lived experiences and resistance practices. Researcher Frost focused on desk-based research, including the literature review and the development of the theoretical framework. She also contributed to contextualizing the empirical findings within broader political and economic structures.

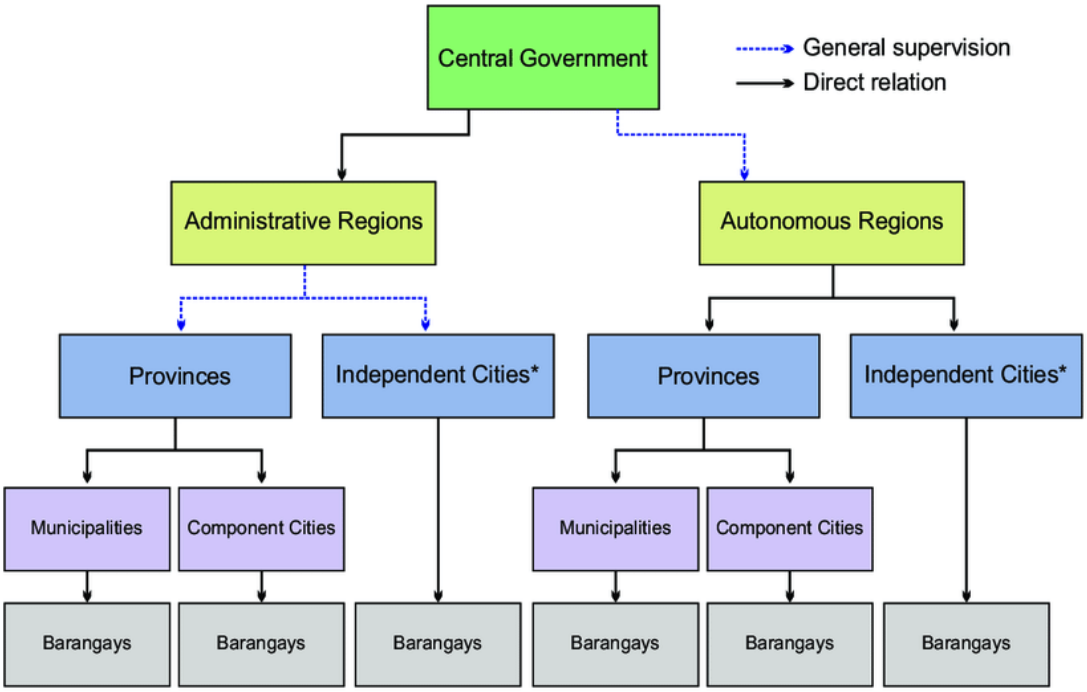
Finally, both researchers collaborated equally on primary and secondary data analysis, including coding and interpretation, conceptual framing, and writing. The final thesis reflects a joint effort, with regular discussion and integration of each researcher's insights.

### 5.1.2 The Case Study

A case study seeks to gain a deep understanding of the case within its real-life environment, acknowledging its complexity and the context in which it exists (Punch, 2014). It takes a holistic approach, aiming to grasp the case as a whole and maintain its overall integrity. This strategy aligns well with our research, which analyzes the relationship between the government and the fisherfolk community of Malapascua Island specifically within the Philippine context.

The island of Malapascua (locally referred to as “Logon”) is located in the Central Visayas Region of the Philippines in the Province of Cebu. It is part of the municipality of Daanbantayan within the 4th congressional district. Daanbantayan contains 20 barangays, which are the smallest administrative divisions in the Philippines and can otherwise be called villages (Fig 1). The barangay of Malapascua, Logon, is estimated to have a population of approximately 6,257 as of the 2020 Census (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021).

*Figure 1: Structure of the Philippine Government*




*(Tupas, 2020)*

*Figure 2: Map of Malapascua, Philippines*


*(Daanbantayan, 2024)*

*Figure 3: Satellite Map of Malapascua*

*(People and The Sea, n.d.)*

### 5.1.3 Local Economy

Malapascua Island is internationally renowned in the recreational SCUBA diving community for its presence of pelagic thresher sharks (Alopias pelagicus) nearby. Notably, the diving site of Monad Shoal, 7.8km off the coast of Malapascua, is currently the only known site on earth where these sharks are reliably observed (daily) at recreational diving depths (Cornish, 2016). As of 2018, these sharks are listed as endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN, 2019). The discovery of the threshers is believed to have originated from local fishers

who noticed the sharks breaching the surface regularly, and the first organized shark dive tours began in the late 1990s (Cornish, 2016). Since then, the presence of thresher sharks has fueled a booming dive tourism industry, which has become a major source of income for Malapascua's residents. This sector has expanded to such an extent that marine ecotourism now constitutes 80% of the local economic output, while the remainder mostly comprises small-scale fishing (Fox, 2019). Since the start of the tourism industry on the island, numerous MPAs have been established at the dive sites as well as around the coast.

### 5.1.4 Economy of fisherfolk

Prior to the development of the tourism industry, Malapascua's economy was almost entirely dependent on small-scale fishing, with no other significant economic sectors present. Today, small-scale fishing remains a cornerstone of Malapascua's economy, with local fishers employing traditional methods such as handlines, gillnets, fish traps, and spearfishing. Among the most common catches is the demersal threadfin bream (Nemipterus furcosus), locally known as *Lagaw*, which plays an important role in sustaining household livelihoods, particularly among artisanal fishers. Other targeted species include small pelagic fish such as sardines and mackerels, with higher-value reef fish including snapper and grouper also sought after to sell to local markets and the tourist businesses.

### 5.1.5 Host Organization

Engagement was established with PepSea, a non-profit organization that supports coastal communities in the Philippines in sustainably managing and benefiting from their marine resources. Its mission is to enhance local livelihoods and protect marine biodiversity through a variety of community-driven initiatives, including waste reduction, sustainable fishing practices, marine research, youth education, and efforts to strengthen the economic resilience of coastal populations (PepSea, 2016). Established in 2015 on Malapascua Island, the organization now collaborates with local, national, and international partners to implement community-designed and community-led programs in the region. Central to its approach is the belief that effective marine conservation must be rooted in local ownership. This involves ensuring that communities not only participate in decision-making but also understand, experience, and value the benefits of managing their marine environments (PepSea, 2016).

## 5.2 Data Collection

The data was collected between February and April, 2025, across three primary neighborhoods around the island. The research was conducted using qualitative semi-structured interviews as well as participant observation. Finally, to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings and identify common themes or discrepancies, the researchers aimed for data triangulation across primary and secondary data sources, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding and mitigating potential biases (Lichtman, 2014; Punch, 2014; Walliman, 2006).

### 5.2.1 Primary Data: Stakeholder Interviews

Qualitative interviews were selected because they are well-suited for exploring how individuals interpret and navigate their everyday experiences within specific contexts. This method is particularly effective for addressing research questions that seek to understand what is happening, how it occurs, and why (Punch, 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016). The adaptable nature of the research design enables semi-structured interview guides to be adjusted throughout the study as well as during the interviews. This flexibility makes it possible to explore emerging themes in greater depth and encourages participants to interpret and connect ideas using their own perspectives (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Four stakeholder interviews were conducted with members of the community.

Interview participants were purposely selected to capture a range of perspectives from individuals directly involved with the local fishing community. In efforts to balance viewpoints, two interviews were conducted with men and two with women. Two interviews were conducted with men who work as fishers, providing insight into traditional fishing livelihoods and related challenges. One woman working in the tourism sector, who also supports data collection efforts for the fishing community, was interviewed to offer a perspective that bridges tourism and fisheries. Finally, an interview was conducted with a woman from PepSea who specializes in community development and has been actively involved with the fishing community in recent years. Interpreters were used for two of the interviews but were not necessary for the other two interviews due to sufficient English level. The interview guide and process were reviewed with the interpreters in advance to ensure preparation and maintain transparency. Observation played

a role in providing context to the data collected, making it a valuable complement to qualitative interviews (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Subsequently, all interviews were transcribed for proper documentation.

### 5.2.2 Secondary Data: Document Analysis

Alongside the primary data collection, numerous secondary sources were also collected and analyzed, as they are also crucial to the research process (Punch, 2014; Walliman, 2006). These included official published documents, state documents and records, commercial or organizational documents, and mass media outputs. The goal of the analysis was to identify relationships such as patterns, themes, or discrepancies between the primary and secondary data in order to draw generalizations regarding our research topic.

## 5.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to code the interview data, utilizing primarily a deductive approach. Key impacts were initially identified inductively throughout primary data collection, allowing for an organic discovery of topics relevant to the research. A deductive approach was then applied through a literature review, which informed the coding framework and allowed for the integration of existing theoretical concepts. The coding process was supported using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and analysis of the data. The interviews were coded thematically according to the coding table (Appendix A). To ensure robustness and validity, insights were combined from primary and secondary data, enabling a comprehensive understanding and strengthening the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

## 5.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this research. In line with ethical guidelines for social research, close attention was paid to key concerns including risk of harm, autonomy and informed consent, as well as protection of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity (Punch, 2014). To minimize risks and ensure ethical integrity, we collaborated closely with local experts

from the NGO to assess and monitor any potential harms, secure informed consent, and safeguard participant confidentiality. Interview consent forms were provided in both English and translated Cebuano versions, which were signed by all participants. Where necessary, an interpreter was used to ensure clarity of the topic and intentions of the research project. Consent for audio recordings was also given verbally at the start of each recording. Regarding privacy and security, all recordings were stored on password- encrypted devices, accessible only to the research team. Personal information was anonymized, and participants were assured that their data would be handled confidentially. This collaborative and reflexive approach aimed to respect the dignity and autonomy of all participants throughout the research process.

### 5.4.1 Positionality of Researchers

We recognize that our social positioning is inherently situated and may influence the research process (Punch, 2014). Presence in the field requires ongoing reflexivity to understand how our backgrounds, perspectives, and interactions might impact the research process (Punch, 2014). In reflecting on our positionality within this research, we are aware that our social positions as foreign researchers working in collaboration with vulnerable or marginalized communities requires deep reflexivity throughout the entire process (Punch, 2014). We consider how our personal values influence the methodological choices we make, the way we interpret findings, and perceptions of the issues we examine. We remain aware that our interpretations are co-constructed with participants and shaped by this positionality and bias. Thus, the findings from the interviews reflect the exchange between the field researcher and the participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Finally, we recognize that our positionality as Western researchers limits our understanding of local contexts fully. Nonetheless, every effort was made to immerse in and appreciate the experiences of the community. This sensitivity to the issues faced by marginalized communities was a key consideration throughout the study.

### 5.4.2 Positionality of Host Organization

The host organization, while fully staffed by Filipinos and dedicated to supporting the local coastal communities, was originally founded by Western actors. It operates within a complex network of local and international partnerships and donors who share similar goals related to community capacity-building. Despite its local leadership and commitment, the organization,

like all institutions, carries inherent biases shaped by donor expectations, organization culture, which voices are prioritized, and how interactions are designed. Our collaboration with this organization granted valuable access and insight but also required us to critically reflect on how institutional dynamics might shape the research context and outcomes.

## 5.5 Limitations

The research process was influenced by the involvement of a host organization, which to a certain extent acted as a local gatekeeper in facilitating the study. While the team was instrumental in arranging interviews and building rapport with the local community, the familiarity between the organization and respondents may have impacted the responses given. To address this potential bias, additional clarifications were sought from the interviewees to ensure that their answers were fully understood and represented accurately. Furthermore, two of the four interviews required the use of interpreters. While interpreters helped bridge language barriers and potentially fostered better rapport with participants, their involvement also introduced the risk of influencing the interview process and the validity of the data. To minimize such risks, the interview guide was carefully discussed with the interpreters beforehand, ensuring that the approach was as consistent and transparent as possible. Finally, clarification was asked by the interpreters when responses were unclear or not understood.

# 6 Analysis: Mapping Impacts

## 6.1 Ecological Degradation

Malapascua Island is facing a multitude of interconnected environmental issues that threaten its marine ecosystems, local livelihoods, and sustainability. One of the most pressing concerns for the fishing community is the decline in fish populations, largely attributed to illegal, commercial, and unsustainable fishing practices (I1, I2, & I3). According to three interviewees, marine environmental degradation around the island is closely linked to the overlapping impacts of commercial fishing, illegal fishing, and tourism.

### 6.1.1 Coral Reefs

Three out of four respondents emphasized that large commercial nets damage the nearby reefs and catch even the smallest fish, disrupting the marine ecosystem, while one respondent stressed that commercial fishing is by far the greatest threat to the coral reefs (I3).

> *They're fishing in the shallow area, so of course the local community will be affected because the corals will be badly hit by the net. Then all the tiny fishes are being caught by their net also, so of course there's really…there's a big impact. (I2)*

Furthermore, illegal fishing practices (from locals and from other islands) including the use of cyanide poison, dynamite, and fine-mesh nets, which indiscriminately capture even the smallest fish, further harm coral structures and marine biodiversity, disrupting breeding cycles and depleting fish stocks (I1, I2, & I3). Respondents shared that illegal methods are used because they are the "easiest way to catch fish" (I3).

> *A contributing factor to why our coral reefs continue degrading is because of irresponsible fishing practices. There is fishing that's really not good practice—sometimes they use illegal methods, like cyanide poison. (I1)*

Lastly, tourism also contributes to reef damage, as anchors from negligent tour guides' boats break corals, and irresponsible snorkeling behavior (such as stepping on or kicking coral) worsens the impact (I1, I3).

### 6.1.2 Overfishing

As coral habitats continue to degrade, the marine life that depends on them also diminishes, creating a cycle of ecological loss and economic hardship for coastal communities. Many fishers now struggle to catch enough to sustain themselves, with small-scale fishers particularly affected by competition from the large commercial operations (I1, I2, I3). Commercial fishers have been identified as the primary cause of overfishing in the area, resulting in a notable decline in fish populations (I1, I2, I3). Respondents shared that when commercial fishers are active in local waters, small-scale fishers particularly struggle to catch enough fish (I1, I2, I3). This intensified fishing pressure leads to depleted stocks, making fish increasingly scarce from day to day and threatening the long-term sustainability of the marine ecosystem. According to one respondent, when asked if the commercial fishers are aware of the damaging effects of their actions, they simply replied "They know." (I1).

> *When the big commercial fishers are allowed to fish, we cannot even catch anything. (I3)*

> *Overfishing? Yes, because of the presence of commercial fishing around. Even within the island, there is a lot of big-scale fishing, which is incomparable to the small fishing that uses sustainable methods. But they cannot compete. The use of fishing nets harvests a lot of fish, and then there are no more fish. They can fish today, but tomorrow and the next day, nothing. (I1)*

The combination of coral reef damage, overfishing, and illegal practices not only threatens biodiversity but also undermines the long-term well-being of the island's fishing communities as well as the tourism sector.

## 6.2 Profits Over Conservation

Interviewees have reported a disconnect between how the tourism sector and commercial fishermen treat the natural resources compared to how the small-scale fishermen do (I1). For example, the crown-of-thorns (coral-feeding predatory starfish) removals by the small-scale fishermen with the aid of PepSea improve the quality of the reef, which directly benefits the tourist guides that can derive material benefits without the manual labor (I1). Another instance of this is waste removal from beaches, in which the tourist businesses do not partake as they prioritize profit over ensuring the sustainability of the natural environment (I4). While some community groups (LogFA & PepSea) actively engage in cleanups and advocate for marine conservation, they often feel unsupported by businesses and authorities (I1, I4). In this sense, fishermen are also safeguarding the tourism industry's interests, usually without any support or recognition.

> *The businessmen here, they don't think about the trash, they don't think about also the fishermen. They only think about how they can get money. (I4)*

> *The group helping the reefs recover, especially with the crown-of-thorns removal, is mostly made up of fishermen, not tourist guides. Then the guides use the reef to offer tours to their visitors. (I1)*

## 6.3 Spatial and Socioeconomic Displacement

Local fishing communities face significant socioeconomic difficulties rooted in the boom of the tourism industry. MPAs around Malapascua are used to benefit tourism rather than the fishermen, restricting their access to traditional fishing grounds (I1, I2, I4).

Although tourism generates income in the region, local fishermen see minimal direct economic benefit. Coupled with commercial and illegal fishing depleting nearby fish stocks, this forces small-scale fishers travel farther offshore, increasing both expenses and risks (I1, I2, I4).

*The government created marine protected areas, but not really protected, because they're used for tourism. So, the impact on the fishing community is that fishermen have to go very far from the island to fish. They really go as far as they can to provide for their family, to provide the food on the table. (I1)*

*Tourists also impact us because we're not allowed to fish in many places anymore[…]Before, we had a lot of fishing areas, but because of resorts, because of tourists, they said it's not allowed. In the dive sites like Gato and Monad, we were allowed to fish before, but not anymore. (I3)*

Tourism development further disadvantages local fishers by driving up living costs. Prices for fishing inputs and goods have inflated, making living costs higher for local fishermen without corresponding income increases.

*We are affected by the prices, because tourism makes higher prices for the local people. The prices are the same for locals and tourists. It's not a good salary for us. If you're a tourist, you can afford, but how about the locals? (I4)*

With limited income, many fishermen struggle to afford basic fishing equipment (I1, I2, I4). Often, they cannot afford necessary supplies like bait and fuel without cash advances from buyers, putting them in debt if their catch is poor (I1, I2)

*There's a lot of expenses incurred before you go. Sometimes they just put half of the max bait because the bait itself is too expensive […] If a fisherman can't afford bait or gasoline, they ask for a cash advance, or the buyer provides it for them. (I1)*

The illegal presence of commercial fishers in municipal waters (Philippine Fisheries Code, 1998) further displaces the local fishermen on top of the loss of traditional fishing grounds from the MPAs reserved for tourism. This overfishing in the municipal waters caused by commercial fishers leads to a cycle of economic hardship for the small-scale fishermen, increasing expenses and risk the further they must travel to catch.

*If there's a law or not, they're still there. They can come here. (I3)*

*The farther the fishing, the more effort— in terms of expenses, fuel, and travel time. In connection with the bad weather, this also affects the safety of fishermen […] Because they cannot fish 10 minutes away from the island. (I1)*

Finally, multiple respondents stressed the continued reliance of fishing due to the lack of other educational or professional opportunities (I3, I4).

*Not all kids are going to school. Not all of them will have career or profession, so they'll mostly end up as fishermen. (I3)*

## 6.4 Political Neglect and Resistance

The fisherfolk community frequently experiences political neglect, with their sentiments and needs often going unheard or ignored by government and municipal authorities (I1, I2, I3, I4). Despite their critical role in reef conservation and community sustenance, fishermen's concerns and voices, particularly regarding illegal and commercial fishing, are mostly ignored (I1, I2, I3).

*They tried to they tried to complain before, but there's still no solution and then they still encounter it nowadays. It always happens, but there're not doing something to complain because there's still no solution. (I2)*

Despite the designation of MPAs and national legislation protecting small-scale fishers, enforcement and maintenance remain weak (I1). The legislation in place that prohibits any commercial fishing within 15 kilometers of the coast (Senate Bill, 2010) is not enforced and commercial fishing vessels regularly empty municipal waters' natural marine resources (I2, I3). One respondent describes that, until 2016, the mayor of the municipality would enforce such rules and punish commercial fishing, but the new mayor has not enforced these rules (I3).

There is resistance from local governance, including some government officials who have vested interests in commercial fishing, hindering the fishermen's efforts to establish a sanctuary and protect sustainable practices (I1, I2, I3, I4). Establishing a fish sanctuary could provide economic stability for future generations of fishermen and is thus significant to the sustainability of the fishing community (I1, I3).

> *The Barangay said they are not allowed to have sanctuary because there's a lot of MPAs. But MPAs are not the same as sanctuaries. (I3)*

> *In our association now, from what I observe, we want to create a sanctuary—but the Barangay doesn't want it. That's what I don't understand—why don't they want one? I think it's because they also do commercial fishing. One of the Barangay council members is involved in that. (I4)*

### 6.4.1 Corruption

One respondent stated that the government may intentionally avoid fully addressing poverty in certain communities because raising living standards could disqualify governments from receiving national programs and funding, which will in part be funneled to officials' personal accounts (I1).

> *Corruption is there. I'm very sorry, but that's true, you know? […] There's a lot of money because Daanbantayan is a first class municipality because of the tourism. But they are hesitant to invest in a good program or a right program for the rightful community […] it's not really the priority. (I1)*

Two interview respondents (I1, I2) stress their lack of trust in the government as they do not enforce ordinances, and the majority of respondents express outright that the government is corrupt and does nothing to control commercial or illegal fishing (I1, I3, I4).

*There is an ordinance, but no action. There is an ordinance, but no enforcement. (I2)*

### 6.4.2 Government Aid

Government support and aid distribution for small-scale fishers is limited, inconsistent, and often distributed unevenly and insufficiently (I1, I2, I3, I4). Programs and subsidies such as resource allocation and equipment support often benefit only a small fraction of fishermen, if at all. Furthermore, the local fisher association (LoGFA) receives significantly less government backing compared to the older, less active, and more commercially oriented group (MaFA) (I3, I4). Government aid programs and subsidies intended for fishers frequently fail due to poor delivery, favoritism, or lack of transparency.

*The old association, MaFA, gets the nets and often receives donations. I've heard that they always get the support. But for us in LoGFA, it's different. (I4)*

*The few subsidies meant for fishermen are only given to a select few—out of around 200 fishermen on the island, they only distribute about 15 who can benefit. (I2)*

# 7 Discussion

To tie our results back to the political ecology power framework introduced earlier, this section will identify the locations of power (material, institutional and structural), how it is exercised, and discuss the marginalizations (economic, ecological and political-economic) experienced by the small-scale fisherfolk that stem from these power exercises. Within this, the role of actors and structures based on the neo-Marxist and actor-oriented political ecology perspective on power relations will also be addressed.

## 7.1 Fishing Practices and Corruption

As examined above, the greatest threat to small-scale fishermen's livelihoods and the marine ecosystems and resources they depend on are illegal and commercial fishers (I1, I2, I3). Commercial fishers on Malapascua Island are described as earning much more than small-scale fishermen and thus having access to larger boats, nets and overall more advanced equipment including radar systems to find fish (I1, I2, I3, I4). While small-scale fishers use mainly sustainable fishing practices such as long-lines, commercial fishing boats have the necessary capital to afford larger, more destructive nets (I1, I2, I3, I4). This means that commercial fishers can leverage greater material power over small-scale fishers, resulting in them being able to catch large amounts of fish at once, often depleting the resources closer to the coastline (I1). This forces the small-scale fishermen to travel longer distances and incurring additional expenses and risks (I1), further increasing the existing material power imbalances between the two groups of fishermen. Moreover, sometimes, these large boats also hit the long-lines of small-scale fishers, dragging and destroying them in the process, which stresses their material power asymmetry as the long-lines are a large expense for them and yet the commercial fishermen face no consequences for these actions (I2).

These asymmetries within material power translate into asymmetries within institutional power that shape resource access and control. Two respondents reported that some commercial fishermen either have connections within different levels of government or are directly part of the local council (I3, I4). The material power these commercial fishermen wield translates into their ability to undermine the much lesser material power of small-scale fishermen in an

institutional setting. Overall, little trust in the government was expressed and respondents all discussed corruption and bribery being a common occurrence at all government levels. The systemic corruption taking place is not merely a rare occurrence but has been structurally engrained within the institutional setting, shaping enforcement, prioritization and aid as further explained below. Without connections to levels of government and councils, small-scale fishermen have limited access to decision-making and processes of prioritization. Material power here is leveraged to gain institutional strength, underpinned by capitalist structures in which corruption functions as a mechanism which commodifies public institutional services and prioritizes capital.

In the case of illegal fishing, the regional or municipal governments seem to not only ignore complaints from small-scale fishermen but actively protect these illegal fishers as they can derive monetary benefits from them (I2, I3). This translates down to local institutional levels, where the Barangay captain (head of Barangay), when asked for help in stopping these violations, has stated that they are unable to act despite this being their responsibility (I3). While structures of capitalist production might incentivize prioritizing groups with greater material power, this prioritization should not solely be attributed to structural power, but also to prioritization by actors themselves.

The power of agency within government levels in the Philippines can also be seen in the discrepancy between the institutionally ascribed treatment of municipal fishers in the national Fisheries Code and the reality in which institutional actors often disregard these rules. The Fisheries Code stresses the protection of municipal fisherfolk and their "preferential use of municipal waters" (Philippine Fisheries Code, 1998, p.2) which is evidently lacking.

## 7.2 Prioritization of Tourism

Similar to the power asymmetries between commercial and small-scale fishermen, the material power that the tourism sector has, compared to the fishing sector, yields it more power within the institutional context and thus little emphasis is placed on improving small-scale fishers' livelihoods and socioeconomic situations. While tourism has only developed within the last two decades, and traditionally fishing was the main source of income (I3, I4), to the government,

the monetary value of the tourism sector has gained in comparison to that of the small-scale fishermen and has thus resulted in an institutional shift in priorities.

For local, small-scale fishermen, tourism does not provide considerable economic benefits, as they only sell a small amount of their catch to resorts (I2). The discussed increased price levels on necessities that not only tourists but also locals face make it more difficult for the locals to afford them (I4,) which reinforces the importance of sufficient catch rates for small-scale fishers and recreational fishermen (supplementing their supply).

## 7.3 Neglect of Interests

Within the context of tourism prioritization and the lack of restrictions on commercial and illegal fishing, small-scale fishermen seldom receive the governmental support they are due. As outlined in the background, the Fisheries Code explicitly states the provision of support to municipal fisherfolk and yet, the interview respondents describe the provision of aid or subsidies as unreliable and inadequate (I2, I3) and that "the decision is in the end of [the] ballpen" (I2) of government officials. Regional and municipal government actors thus wield sufficient power to act according to their own priorities rather than the priorities described by the national government. Their preferential treatment of MaFA over LogFa showcases their neglect of small-scale fishermen compared to more commercially oriented fishermen with more monetary funds. All the while, LogFa plays an active role in conservation activities on the island and their livelihoods depend more strongly on successful daily catches.

Even with seemingly sufficient funds provided by the national government for regional budget allocations, the disadvantaged status of small-scale fishermen is disregarded not just in favor for commercial fishing operations and tourism but also to ensure that the national funds are not decreased based on improvements in poverty levels and living standards that would justify lowering the financial assistance (I1). Profit and budget maximization-seeking institutions here show little regard for the powerless small-scale fisherfolk that face adverse structures. Distributional choices regarding aid and subsidies allocation thus heavily depend on the capitalist value put on the economic activity.

Material power as a motivator for behavior is strongly visible in the difference of the treatment of the available natural resources and ecosystems by the tourism businesses and the commercial fishermen versus the small-scale fishermen, particularly those who are part of LogFA. Crown-of-thorns removals and waste collections as well as the usage of sustainable fishing practices are undertaken by small-scale fishermen recognizing the need to maintain the ecosystem to secure their livelihoods. Without such care, the natural assets central to tourism and fishing would degrade and threaten their profits. Capitalist rationale seems to be a structural motivator to disregard long-term sustainability for the benefit of short-term monetary benefits especially for individuals and businesses that have the necessary capital to move their business elsewhere if the resource were depleted or degraded (I1). Despite not using destructive fishing practices, this leaves small-scale fishermen to face the consequences of capital-driven rationale, with little power for their voice to be heard and considered by decision-makers.

## 7.4 Dependency and Resistance

One form of resistance against these strong and adverse power structures is the request for a fish sanctuary managed by the fishermen. Here, LogFA plays an essential role as it bundles the voices of many small-scale fishermen into one association with a more powerful voice. The fish sanctuary is their way of ensuring their socioeconomic future by protecting a part of the natural environment they depend on. While the MPAs around the island are controlled by the government and for tourism purposes, this sanctuary is meant for conservation purposes only and thus primarily serves the interest of fishermen. Socioeconomic dependence on fishing resources will continue to play a central role in many people's lives as educational opportunities are limited and some children have no other choice than becoming a fisherman (I3, I4).

Yet here again, adverse power structures and exercises of power by governmental actors impede their action to reclaim some power. Their initial request was denied with the explanation that there were already many other MPAs (for tourism) (I3), and another respondent voiced that this fish sanctuary could restrict commercial fishing, and this might have played into their denial as well (I4). Prioritizations of short-term monetary gains over long-term livelihood sustainability have undermined the efforts of small-scale fishermen to have their voice recognized. While this

request for a fish sanctuary shows that small-scale fishermen are not without agency, adverse power structures created by material, institutional and structural power highly restrict it.

The fishing communities remain impoverished and isolated, with limited educational or economic alternatives (I1, I3, I4). This systemic neglect forces fishermen into a constant struggle for their livelihoods, contrasting sharply with the economic prosperity enjoyed by commercial fishers and tourism enterprise owners. This dependency was also observed in illegal fishing practices. When asked why these methods were used, respondents said they felt they had no other option (I3, I4).

With the help of PepSea, LogFA has petitioned for a sanctuary again, emphasizing the necessity for this sanctuary. The previously explained low prioritization of fishermen has also meant that their request for a community-managed fish sanctuary has taken a long processing time (I1, I2, I3).

## 7.5 Asymmetrical Power Relations and Cycles of Marginalization

As described above, small-scale fishermen are pushed aside in many different ways and power imbalances disadvantaging small-scale fishermen compared to commercial ones intersect with adverse asymmetries due to tourism prioritization. Capitalist structures and accumulation priorities shaping institutional settings have allowed actors with greater material power to benefit from marine resources to the disadvantage of small-scale fishermen. The consequences of this manifest as interrelated socioeconomic, ecological, spatial, and political impacts analyzed in the previous chapter.

Yet, these impacts are only the visible effects of invisible structures of marginalization small-scale fishermen are subjected to. This systemic marginalization manifests in multiple, interlinked ways. Economically, small-scale fishers are disadvantaged due to declining catch volumes, which forces many to fish beyond municipal waters, in turn leading to spatial marginalization. Additionally, reef degradation, worsened by unsustainable practices and insufficient regulation, leads to long-term ecological marginalization. Through corruption and institutional neglect, capital and political ties are leveraging power, and the lack thereof

excludes small-scale fishermen from political processes that shape their productive activities and livelihoods, intensifying marginalization. Economic and political-economic marginalization here create a cycle that forces some small-scale fishermen to retort to destructive practices that further harm the ecosystem they desperately need for their livelihood and thus marginalizing them ecologically, which in turn further heightens the former two marginalizations.

Through the fish sanctuary, small-scale fishermen try to regain power over natural resources to secure their socioeconomic future and break from the cycle of marginalization described above. A greater abundance of fish and a protected reef system close to the coast would lessen the economic, spatial and ecological marginalization. Finally, a fish sanctuary managed by small-scale fishermen would greatly enhance their political agency and visibility, providing them with power and agency to counter the influence of commercial fishermen and tourism operators.

# 8 Conclusion

Our case study provides valuable insights into patterns of power asymmetries and cycles of marginalization in the local context. Both the commercial fishing and tourism industries share key similarities: they are sectors with considerable capital resources and economic output that contribute significantly to environmental degradation and adverse socioeconomic impacts for small-scale fishermen. These visible impacts are not of an apolitical nature but rather tightly connected to political processes and invisible structures grounded in power that privilege some actors while systematically excluding others. Material, institutional and structural power here reinforce each other and create a tight web of power asymmetries prioritizing capital interests, often at the expense of small-scale fishermen.

The marginalization experienced by fishing communities is thus a direct result of these intersecting power relations and shows the adverse effects of power asymmetries on small-scale fisherfolk. Economic, ecological and political-economic marginalization are not isolated from each other but rather reinforcing, and thus further contributing to their vulnerable situation. Despite the existence of legal codes intended to protect small-scale fishers, systemic corruption, weak enforcement, and exclusionary governance structures leave them marginalized and at significant risk of economic hardship. At best, local government representation is ineffective, and at worst, it actively suppresses their interests. The fish sanctuary is the small-scale fishermen's way of resisting and changing their systemic marginalization.

Indeed, marginalization of fisherfolk must be a central consideration in any empirical investigation into their struggles. Sustainable futures for small-scale fisheries depend on inclusive governance, enforcement capacity, and diversified livelihoods sensitive to socio-political contexts.

## 8.1 Limitations of Findings

Although this study does not claim to offer findings that can be universally applied, it provides a detailed understanding of the local conditions, especially regarding the intersectional dynamics, social positioning, and the challenges faced by the fishing community in this

particular context. As a case study, this approach contributes valuable insights that, while not broadly generalizable, are meaningful for understanding the specific conditions of Malapascua and its community.

## 8.2 Future Research

The potential of a fish sanctuary as a form of resistance is a topic that should be investigated further. Questions regarding agency in relation to capacity-building should also be explored on Malapascua Island and the broader region. Furthermore, investigations into rigidity of power structures and the potential to change them should be examined, as well as the role of national or international organizations and their abilities to shape these power structures. Finally, given women's vital role in sustaining fishing communities, their contributions and challenges deserve focused study to ensure inclusive and effective policymaking.

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# 10 Appendices

## Appendix A: NVivo Coding Table

| Code | Sub-code | Description |
|---|---|---|
| **Levels** | Global | |
| | Regional | Cebu |
| | Municipal | Daanbantayan |
| | Local | Barangay level, Malapascua/Logon |
| **Impact** | Environmental | i.e. ecosystem degradation, dwindling fish stocks |
| | Political | i.e. political invisibility, aid provision |
| | Socio-economic | i.e. increased price levels, threatened livelihoods |
| | Spatial | i.e. displacement from fishing grounds |
| **Source of Power** | Structural | The ability of structures to influence institutional contexts or other systems to benefit certain actors. (Svarstad et al., 2018) |
| | Institutional | Informal and formal rules that shape power relations and the struggle over resources. (Murray & Burrows, 2017) |
| | Material | Differences among actors/groups in terms of control over, and access to, natural resources focusing on the material aspects (i.e. capital, technology) of this control. (Murray & Burrows, 2017) |

# Appendix B: Photographs

Guimbitayan Fishing Community, Northern Malapascua

*All photographs are our own.*

# Appendix C: Interview Consent Form

*The researchers have signed consent forms from all interviewees but have not been included for anonymity purposes. Interviewees were also provided a copy translated into Cebuano for their reference.*

**Consent to Participate in a Bachelor Thesis at the Faculty of Social Science at Lund University**

**FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, PLEASE CONTACT:**
Alexander Chase Flanagan: al6700fl-s@student.lu.se
Serena Frost: se6136fr-s@student.lu.se

Before we ask you if you agree to participate in this research project, we will provide you with some information about the research and your rights as a participant. We invite you to ask any questions that you feel will help you understand this information. Personal data needs to be collected for the purpose of this thesis. The aim of collecting them is to better understand the profiles of the interview participants.

**Purpose**
This research is being conducted as part of Alexander Chase Flanagan and Serena Frost's bachelor's thesis in Development Studies and Political Science under the supervision of **Thomas Hickmann**, Associate Professor at Lund University Department of Political Science.

**Description**
The focus of this research is to better understand the context for a potential Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) in Malapascua. A LMMA serves as a different type of Marine Protected Area (MPA) strategy for marine conservation while also prioritizing the livelihoods of local fishers. As opposed to a traditional, governmentally managed MPA, (a top-down approach), an LMMA is a community-centered and co-managed approach and thus gives the community the power to govern their natural resources and ensure their economic sustainability. There are many different ways to set up a LMMA (for example, similarly to a fish sanctuary) and it is thus well suited to meet the diverse needs of the community.

We are interested in your observations and views regarding the impact of tourism and the changes within the marine ecosystem and how they might affect your daily life and the community. We would also like to understand the social structure of your community and challenges and potentials for the LMMA that come to your mind.

**Question Methodology**
You will be asked to answer questions orally, which will take about one hour of your time. If you consent, the interview will be recorded via audio with a laptop computer as well as a cell phone. Audio files will not be public, and will only be transcribed and used for our analysis. Copies of your interview will be made available to you upon request.

**Protection of Personal Data**
Personal data will be stored on password-protected drives for the duration of the research project which only the researchers (Alexander Chase Flanagan and Serena Frost) will have access to. Access to personal data will be strictly restricted to the researchers (Alexander Chase Flanagan and Serena Frost) and their supervisors. We do not share your personal data with third parties. Your name, along with all other personal identifying information will be

anonymized for the study. Privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

**Risks and benefits of participation**
The risks associated with this study are anticipated to be minimal. The questions will not involve sensitive personal information. If you wish not to answer a particular question, you are free to simply decline. The benefit of participating in this study is that you will have the opportunity to voice your perceptions of the changing natural environment affecting you and your community and contribute to change and improvement. In addition, your participation provides insights for a project with great benefits and empowerment for the community. Finally, the insights you provide will be used for research to further the knowledge of coastal fishing communities and published at a university level for others around the world to learn as a global aim toward sustainability for all.

**Participant's rights**
If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to:

- withdraw your consent, discontinue participation, and request that the audio recording be paused at any stage without penalty
- refuse to answer particular questions
- contact us at any time in the future to change or delete an answer
- receive information about the personal data we process about you
- have inaccurate personal data about you corrected.

Tapes and transcripts will be made available to you upon request. Your privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact us at the provided contact details stated on the first page. Unless the assigned written acknowledgement of consent has been received before the interview, verbal consent will be requested on the audio recording, at the start of the interview.

**Do you understand the project and the implications of your participation?**
☐ YES

**Do you agree to confirm that you consent to participate?**
☐ YES

**Do you agree to have this interview recorded?**
☐ YES

Location Date

Signature Name (printed)

# Appendix D: Interview Question Guide

## Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire

### General Background

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your role in the community?
2. How long have you lived/worked on Malapascua?

### Topic 1: Effects of Development on Malapascua

3. Have you noticed or heard about any changes in the coral reefs?
    - What do you think has contributed to these changes?
4. Have you noticed or heard about changes in local fish populations and the broader marine ecosystem?
    - Follow-up: Do you think overfishing is a growing issue? Why or why not?
5. Have you seen any changes in the amount of waste that can be found in the natural environment (on land and in the water)?
    - Follow-up: How do tourists and businesses contribute to waste problems?
    - Follow-up: Are there any existing efforts to improve waste management?
6. How has tourism impacted your livelihood and the local economy?
    - Follow-up: What are the benefits and challenges of tourism for the local community?
7. Do local fishermen rely on tourism?
    - If so, in what ways (e.g., selling seafood, boat tours)?
8. Have traditional fishing practices changed due to the rise of dive tourism? If so, how?
9. What are the local dynamics between tourism businesses and local fishermen?
    - If there are any tensions, what do you think are their sources?
    - How do you think such tensions could be resolved to achieve coexistence?

### Topic 2: Social Structure of Community

10. How is the membership in the fisherman association handled? Can anyone join?
    - Is there cooperation/communication with community members that are not relying on fishing but like to fish recreationally?
11. How would you describe the social ties within the community?
12. How do you perceive the information flow within the community? Is information only distributed to certain people? Does everyone receive important information in a timely manner?

### Topic 3: Agency, Governance, and Resistance

13. What trends have you observed in fish stocks over time?
14. How have changes in fish populations affected your livelihood or the livelihoods of others in the community?
15. If you fish: Which fishing methods do you practise?
16. Do you think the government is doing enough to protect the marine environment? Why or why not?

17. Have you heard of or participated in discussions about establishing a Fish Sanctuary (LMMA) in Malapascua?
    - Follow-up: Would you support a fisherman-managed or co-managed area to protect fish stocks? Why or why not?
18. What do you think would be needed for such a system to work effectively in Malapascua?
19. What do you think are objectives the fish sanctuary/LMMA should achieve environmentally, socially and economically?
20. Do you think people will follow the rules when they are communicated and the necessity is explained?
21. Do you think there are constraints (time, economic) that may hinder people from being an active part of the LMMA/sanctuary management? Which? Can you think of incentives that would increase participation?
22. Do you think that there are factors (poverty, high dependence on fish) that would force people to disregard the LMMA/sanctuary? Do you expect high levels of compliance?
23. How do you think rules could best be enforced?
    - Do you think government support is a necessity for this?