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POLITICS: Controversy surrounds fishermen's deaths

Report says MPAs cause of deaths

Christopher Pala

A scientific study by a top US team of specialists in fishermen's deaths has ignited a storm of controversy by suggesting that the creation of marine protected areas (MPAs) in Guam, a decade ago, caused the death by drowning of 15 or so Chamorro fishermen. The study, "The Impact of Marine Preserve Areas on the Safety of Fishermen on Guam," implies that because the number of Chamorros who drowned while they were fishing steeply increased after the creation of the MPAs, the MPAs were a cause of these drownings.

The study, grounded in death certificates and press reports of drownings, does not distinguish between Chamorros who were fishing for a living in skiffs; casting from limestone platforms exposed to rogue waves; recreationally trolling from yachts or diving at night with flashlights, nor does it state the ethnic composition of the non-Chamorros who also drowned while fishing and whose numbers remained largely unchanged throughout the two decades.

Neither the study's authors nor its critics offered any explanation of why more than twice as many Chamorros drowned as non-Chamorros.

The study found that while 10 Chamorros drowned while fishing in the 90s, 25 died from 2000 through to 2009.

At the same time, the location of the drownings also dramatically changed: while only 20% were on the more dangerous windward coast in the 1990s, 63% took place there in the 2000s.

Three of the five MPAs are located on the leeward side of the island and the northern and southern end also each have one. "The major finding of the study was that, for Chamorro fishermen, the risk of drowning more than doubled after the MPAs (created in 1997) were enforced in 2001," the study states.

It was performed by the Alaska and Pacific office of the Federal National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) at the request of the Honolulu-based Western Pacific Fisheries Management Council, on whose website (under "News") it can be found. It has not been published elsewhere.

Known as Wespac, the council, one of eight quasi-federal panels that advise the US government on its fisheries policy, has a reputation for extreme opposition to MPAs and for defending corporate fishing interests under the guise of protecting native fishing rights.

A chorus of criticism has attacked the study as unfounded and irresponsible, with several scientists saying that the reason there's more fishing on the windward side is because overfishing and land development have depleted the fish stocks and killed many reefs on the leeward side.

"On the contrary, the MPAs are working well and increasing the fish stocks in their vicinity," said Robert Richmond of the University of Hawaii, who spent 18 years as a professor of marine biology at the University of Guam and was involved in the design and creation of the MPAs.

"If anything, the MPAs are keeping more fishermen on the leeward side and preventing more drownings. Nearly a third of the fish tagged inside the MPAs have been caught outside them.

"The preserves are still heavily used by Chamorros for recreation and, to some extent, subsistence," added Tim Rock, an underwater photographer in Guam, pointing out that most MPAs allow throw-nets and shore casting.

Night spear-fishing and gill-netting, highly destructive methods

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banned in the MPAs, are only appropriate to the calm waters of the leeward, Richmond said.

"It's appalling that someone is cynically trying to use personal tragedies to mislead the public," fumed Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia, probably the world's most influential fisheries scientist.

"This study proves nothing at all. It's perfectly obvious from the map that the MPAs are tiny and there's plenty of room to fish in the rest of the leeward coast, if there is any fish there." The three MPAs on the leeward amount to about 10% of the leeward coastline. The report says, "As MPAs were established and enforced, Chamorro subsistence fishermen began fishing more heavily on the East coast. That increased exposure to more hazardous conditions and resulted in higher risk of drowning."

In a telephone interview, team leader and co-author Jennifer Lincoln denied her study claimed to prove any causal link between the MPAs and drownings—only that the latter increased and changed location after the MPAs were enforced.

However, she still insisted that the study's title, "The Impact of Marine Preserve Areas on the Safety of Fishermen on Guam," was accurate.

Lincoln, whose team specialises in analysing the causes of US fishermen's deaths and proposing ways to reduce them, said she was originally approached by Wespac to investigate whether the creation of the MPAs had caused an increase in Chamorro fishermen's drownings. The study was funded out of NIOSH's regular funds, not by Wespac, she said.

"We spent two weeks in Guam, but most of the time we were collecting data from the Bureau of Vital Statistics," she said. "We talked to a few fishermen, including Manny Duenas, but our study focused on record-collecting."

Duenas, president of the Guam Fishermen's co-op, is a long-time Wespac associate and a strong MPA opponent who told Kuam News in Guam after the study came out, "The value of these preserves—is it worth the bodies?"

Lincoln said that before she got to Guam, she was given a report, "Guam as a Fishing Community," that claims Chamorro elders have complained that the MPAs "deprived them of traditional fishing grounds" where they "traditionally taught their children and grandchildren to fish." She said she did not know that its authors, Stewart Allen and Paul Bartram, have close ties to Wespac. "I didn't have any reason not to believe the study," she said.

"We looked for other explanations as to why the Chamorro fishermen were fishing more on the windward side, but we didn't find any," she said.

"However, if the data are there, I'm going to look at them. It's my job to find out why Chamorro drownings went up like that and what can be done to prevent them."

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