

Conservation, ethnicity, and the question of rights (Dr. Frank Muttenzer)

International conservation efforts increasingly focus on local communities that are pioneering remote areas or are intensifying their use of them. Such frontiers are often, therefore, sites for friction or conflict between powerful international bodies and local residents, be they long term local communities, migrants, local governments, NGOs, eco-tourist ventures, etc. The proposed research would examine a particular context in which such conflicts of interest are negotiated, in Madagascar, where conservation efforts have often promoted local conflict and/or scholarly controversy.

Recent developments in anthropological thinking about culture, history and agency have put in question some previous approaches to the design of conservation programs that aim to involve local peoples. The project proposed here concerns a marine frontier on the south-west coast of Madagascar used by the Vezo, a semi-nomadic fishing people whose livelihood strategies involve seasonal movements. The project has been designed to take full advantage of previous ethnographic research on the Vezo way of life and theoretical developments in “second generation” political ecology; it will compare the settlement histories of two regional communities and their relation to non-local commodity chains implicated in the over-harvesting of marine ecosystems or particular species, which in turn has affected the capacity of those systems to sustain livelihoods.

Prior research has established that seasonal mobile foraging is a long-standing Vezo solution to the ecological constraints of core settlement areas. Its cultural salience is expressed in Vezo pride in their marine foraging skills, which are in turn associated with magico-religious beliefs and practices; all of these are also implicated in Vezo identity itself. Thus, Vezo involvement in marine conservation initiatives, such as temporary reserves and permanent no-take zones does not entail the suspension of their prior practices and understandings: on the contrary, the role Vezo play in the success or failure of local conservation programs remains crucially determined by them.

The planned three-year research project aims to investigate the relations between ecological and cultural specificities in a region where Vezo and conservation policy makers negotiate their views, their ambitions, and rights to access marine resources. Through an investigation of local agents' understandings of ecology, ethnicity and the legitimacy of resource claims, the research aims to contextualise the intended and unintended outcomes of environmental interventions. In learning how heterogeneous claims to authority are grounded in the profile of cultural models at work in practical conservation programs, the research is aimed at strengthening the design of such programs.