

Sustainable fishing in one of Malawi's biggest wetlands

June 13 2017



Credit: Leiden University

The Elephant Marsh is one of the biggest wetlands in Malawi and many of the country's inhabitants rely on it for their small-scale fishing catch. To make their small fisheries sustainable and future-proof, the government has to support the fishing community and not impose too many regulations. This is the finding of PhD candidate Ishmael Kosamu.

Ishmael Kosamu divided his time between the Centre for Environmental Sciences (CML) in Leiden, the Netherlands and the University of Malawi, Polytechnic, in Blantyre, Malawi. He teaches students of environmental sciences in Malawi, but this is also the location where he

conducted fieldwork for his PhD research. Kosamu studied the sustainability of small fisheries at the Elephant Marsh Wetland in the southern region of Malawi. This is one of the largest wetlands in Malawi: in periods of drought it is around 500 km², but in the rainy season the wetland extends to a surface area of around 2700 km².

Small-scale fisheries

Many of the region's inhabitants are dependent on the fish catch from the wetland. 'They are mostly traditional fishing households who operate in a small area mainly for local consumption of the fish,' Kosamu explains. But the ecosystem of the wetland is under pressure as a result of climate change, population growth, rural poverty and the conversion of wetland to agricultural land. This affects the [fish stocks](#) around the wetland, and consequently the income and livelihoods of the fishermen. 'There is no adequate monitoring or control by the government to maintain this wetland as a natural food resource. For my PhD research I studied what is needed to make sure that these small-scale fisheries are future-proof.'

Map out the involved parties

For his research, Kosamu observed and talked to people living in the region, the fishermen, traditional leaders, and local government. It is essential to identify all the key players in and around the fishery and recognize their interconnectedness, in Kosamu's opinion. 'Before any governance system is designed and operationalized, there is a need to define and understand the interests and roles of each actor, including the social networks that exist among them.'

Intelligently absent government

What Kosamu found most surprising is that good management of the small-scale fisheries at the Elephant Marsh actually requires very few government-imposed rules. 'To successfully guide the fisheries towards sustainability, the Malawi government needs to find a clever way of keeping its distance. There has to be a framework for resource management, but the making of decisions should be kept at the lowest possible level.'

Support local community

The government can create this framework by providing the fishing communities with information about fish stocks, legitimising local institutions and protecting the resource boundaries from external intrusion. It should be the community itself that decides on the rules for sustainable fishing and then monitors those rules. This will lead to an 'institution' that is based in the local community, that does not have too many hard and fast rules and that is therefore able to be flexible in handling changing circumstances, Kosamu explains.

Other countries

Kosamu's findings benefit not only the inhabitants of the Elephant Marsh, where work is ongoing to set up this type of management system; the principles he is advocating are also applicable in any other developing country that wishes to sustain the future of small-scale fisheries. 'I was surprised to find that for successful management of the Elephant Marsh fishery, the [government](#) of Malawi needs to be as intelligently absent as possible,' Kosamu comments. 'This means it's not always necessary to set up an expensive monitoring system to protect natural food sources such as wetlands. When we looked carefully at what actually works, it became clear that we don't always need formal institutions, but that good natural resources management can also be

flexible, low-cost and locally organised.'

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: Sustainable fishing in one of Malawi's biggest wetlands (2017, June 13) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-06-sustainable-fishing-malawi-biggest-wetlands.html>

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