

HOW DIGITAL IS WHAT DIVIDES US? THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) IN SUPPORT OF REGIONAL NETWORKS OF LEADERS WORKING TOWARD SUSTAINABLE COASTAL COMMUNITIES AND ECOSYSTEMS

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Learning is a core idea for building capacity and achieving tangible results to advance marine and coastal management in developing countries. Information and communication technology (ICT) is a low cost way to overcome some of the barriers to good governance and sustainable development by enabling leaders to become more effective, allowing societies to work more transparently and inclusively, and strengthening value chains for sustainable products from the producers to markets. ICT is also seen as a way to improve coastal management practice by transmitting messages from emerging experience, in the style of Web 1.0, and as a platform for reflection and dynamic formulation of those messages with far flung colleagues, experts and leaders, the promise of Web 2.0. Fostering communities of practice across regions and continents is motivated by the need to reduce the profound isolation which ICM practitioners feel and build their social capital. However, active communities are based on engaging in joint activities and building personal commitment, and ICT by itself cannot supply these essential ingredients.

The Sustainable Coastal Communities and Ecosystems (SUCCESS) initiative funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and carried out by the Coastal Resources Center at the University of Rhode Island, supports regional learning networks in Latin America, the Ecocostas Network, and in East Africa through the Wiomariculture Network. It also provides global support through web sites that include an electronic newsletter created by partners and practitioners and web pages incorporating substantial explanatory text and annotations on the ICM documents it serves up.

The Ecocostas Network uses internet based communication and information archiving, retrieval and analysis to support its Spanish - speaking membership. Web pages contain content generated by members and serve as a key outreach component. Members highly value the face-to-face contact which occurs through periodic meetings and joint projects within sub-regions as well as major events that bring together the membership as a whole on an annual basis. The network is engaged in a regional program to certify marine and coastal management practitioners. This focuses and energizes the group and provides a pathway for expansion.

Wiomariculture provides similar technical support to its smaller membership, and is aimed at supporting mariculture experts in East Africa. It is still working to define its primary membership, as there are key differences between the needs and interests of regional experts and those of local based field extension agents. In the absence of a unifying group project the

network is exploring forms of leadership to seed interchanges and sustain interest among a diverse group over a longer period of time. Effective extension in mariculture is based on face-to-face contact with farmers, while the emerging community of practice in mariculture itself is relying on ICT. Cell phone technology, popular and growing rapidly in Africa, might be a good way to announce news items of special interest such as market prices, draw attention to the web page or respond to specific farmer or extension agent questions as part of a broader extension effort.

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