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Tourism-Based Alternative Livelihoods for Small Island Communities Transitioning towards a Blue Economy

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Abstract: Tourism development has been promoted as an alternative livelihood to reduce the dependence of small island communities on declining marine resources. It is often central to emerging agendas around marine planning and the blue economy. However, relatively little is known about how communities perceive tourism development as an alternative and potentially sustainable livelihood in their area and its implications. This qualitative study tracks a governance system in transition and analyzes the factors perceived by stakeholders to be driving and hindering the adoption of tourism-based livelihoods on small islands in UNESCO's Taka Bonerate Kepulauan Selayar Biosphere Reserve (Indonesia). The findings indicate that, despite a series of tourism-enhancing investments and initiatives and the positive attitudes of local communities towards it, tourism is not a direct route towards sustainability for small island communities. The benefits of tourism are perceived to be unequally distributed. The lack of education and skills limits participation in new job opportunities, and the incentives to continue destructive fishing inhibits livelihood transition to tourism. The article concludes that tourism cannot be assumed to generate simultaneous benefits for conservation and development without more equitable benefit sharing, the meeting of basic needs in communities, and addressing the drivers of unsustainable livelihoods.

Keywords: sustainable livelihoods; eco-tourism; alternative livelihoods; conservation development; marine planning; blue economy

1. Introduction

Tourism is promoted as beneficial for both conservation and community development [1]. For community development, it provides new income-generating activities and diversifies livelihoods, providing additional options for populations facing environmental and social change. For conservation, it can reduce dependence on industries and practices that extract natural resources or degrade ecosystems, and generate incentives to protect biodiversity and landscapes that are attractive to tourists [2–4]. In marine environments, tourism is increasingly lucrative [5], and specifically the development of sustainable tourism is central to efforts aimed at improving the integrated governance of marine environments (through marine planning, for instance) and to wider discourses of blue growth and the blue economy [6,7].

The environmental impacts (e.g., pollution and increased resource consumption) of tourism and the strategies of eco-tourism to minimize and mitigate these impacts are well

known [8,9]. The impacts of tourism-based alternative livelihoods on affected communities are more complex and mixed [10], and more research is needed within marine systems. Participation in tourism and access and barriers to its benefits can depend on levels of power, education, language skills, physical proximity to tourism sites, and social capital [11]. Initiatives to develop tourism can also be met with resistance from communities, which has partly been linked to the lack of understanding of the perceptions and aspirations of residents of the prospective area [12,13]. Community participation in tourism is clearly critical for the community component of the conservation-development win-win to be achieved. However, there is a lack of studies on the factors that drive and present barriers to communities accessing benefits, and on those supporting the development of sustainable marine tourism over time within a broader context of governance transitions towards integrated marine planning and the blue economy.

This study aims to contribute towards filling this knowledge gap by analyzing the perceptions of stakeholders on the factors that enable and block the development of sustainable tourism as a source of alternative livelihoods for small island communities undergoing environmental and governance changes. Specifically, we explore the factors perceived to support or hinder the transition from predominantly fishing-based to tourism-based livelihoods. We focus on small island communities because many are dependent on often declining fisheries and extractive activities, and because tourism is often developed as an alternative livelihood to diversify economies and protect fragile small island ecosystems [14–16].

First, we describe the case study of small islands in the Taka Bonerate Kepulauan Selayar (TBKS) UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Second, we describe the learning history method used to record and document the recollections and perceptions of local to national stakeholders involved in or affected during the history of tourism development in TBKS. Third, we present results on the history, drivers, and barriers to tourism development. Finally, we conclude that in order to support transitions to sustainable livelihoods, tourism, conservation and marine planning policy and programming need to address both the barriers communities face in adopting tourism-based livelihoods as well as the drivers of destructive fishing.

2. Study Site

Indonesia, the largest archipelagic state in the world, comprises 13,466 islands, a majority of which are classified as small islands (less than 10,000 square kilometers and with <500,000 resident population) (Hess, 1990) in [17,18]. This study focuses on a constellation of small islands within the Taka Bonerate Kepulauan Selayar (TBKS) UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Kepulauan Selayar Regency, South Sulawesi (Figure 1). TBKS Biosphere Reserve was established in 2015 to protect the area's ecological and cultural significance. The main habitats found in the reserve are coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass, lagoons, and sand dunes which host various charismatic species, such as protected turtle species [19]. As with other UNESCO biosphere reserves, TBKS promotes solutions that seek to conserve biodiversity and maintain healthy ecosystems while simultaneously meeting the material needs and aspirations of an increasing number of people [20]. These functions are pursued through the division of the designated biosphere reserve sites into three main zones: core area (protected area), buffer zone (used for activities compatible with sound ecological practices), and transition zone (areas for sustainable economic and human activities) [20].

About 125,000 people live in the reserve, comprising a variety of ethnic groups. On Selayar Island, for example, the Selayar are the largest ethnic group, but other groups include the Bugis, Bajo, Buton, and ethnic Chinese [21]. The fisheries, mostly small-scale fishing and trading, are the principal economic activity, but tourism is becoming increasingly important. Destructive fishing, including blast and cyanide fishing, have damaged critical habitats such as coral reefs [22]. The development of tourism within the small islands of TBKS has been a recent focus of the government, in addition to a series of donor-supported conservation and development programs, in part as a means of providing

alternative livelihoods to destructive fishing and to reduce pressure on marine ecosystems. Therefore, TBKS provides an interesting case study for exploring the enablers and barriers to local communities accessing sustainable tourism-based livelihoods as part of integrated marine planning and governance.

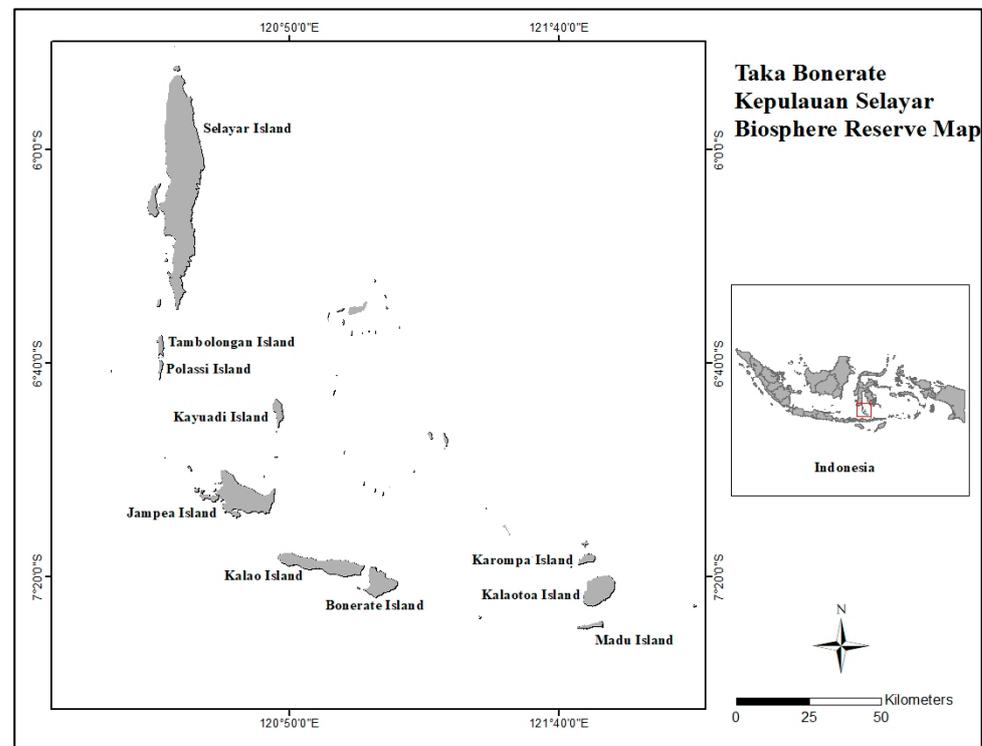


Figure 1. Map of Taka Bonerate Kepulauan Selayar Biosphere Reserve, Indonesia.

3. Method

Rather than take a snap-shot analysis of a single tourism initiative, we adopted a learning history approach to understand the influence of macro-trends and multiple initiatives on tourism development over time. Learning histories [23] involve stakeholders sharing their recollections, experiences and lessons learned about the past successes and challenges of change processes. Adapting tools presented by Fortnam et al. [24], in this research we documented and discussed key events in the history of tourism-based livelihoods as part of marine planning in TBKS through focus groups, in-depth key informant interviews, and secondary data analysis.

Five focus groups were held between January and June 2019 with a total of 31 participants, purposefully selected based on their involvement in the development and implementation of “sustainable” livelihood practices, or because they were affected by livelihood policies, programs and projects (Table 1). The discussions were performed over two focus group sessions: (i) participant generation of a timeline for the development of tourism-based alternative livelihoods (both at national and local levels); (ii) a 16 item semi-structured discussion of the barriers and enablers to developing tourism as a source of alternative livelihoods. In addition, invitations for semi-structured in-depth interviews were sent to 12 key informants, with 5 people representing key local government, the private sector, and local communities exposed to tourism developments (e.g., resort building) agreeing to be interviewed. This was performed to probe further on themes that emerged from the focus groups. Flexible thematic analysis [25] of focus group and interview data involved multiple analysts first coding transcripts according to broad factors identified in the literature as enabling change processes [24], and then analytically coding key themes in the data inductively. Two of the researchers compared the results to original transcripts to ascertain whether the coding schemes and analysis accurately represented the discussions.

Secondary data analysis was performed to analyze the socio-economic characteristics and trends in tourist visits using statistical survey reports provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics of Selayar Regency and collected data obtained from the Selayar Office for Tourism in 2020, respectively.

Table 1. Composition of participants of five focus groups ($n = 31$).

| Group | Composition |
|--------------------|---|
| 1 (national level) | 3 researchers, 2 practitioners from government institutions |
| 2 (national level) | 1 business operator, 4 researchers, 2 practitioners from government institutions, 1 practitioner from non-government institutions |
| 3 (local level) | 5 practitioners from government institutions (provincial and regency levels) |
| 4 (local level) | 5 practitioners from government institutions (provincial and regency levels) |
| 5 (local level) | 1 practitioner from government institutions (regency level), 2 business operators, 3 representatives of local communities (village level), 2 community-based organization |

4. Results

The following sections summarize the key findings on the history of livelihood changes and tourism development in TBKS, and the key barriers and drivers to the promotion of tourism as an alternative livelihood.

4.1. History of Livelihood Changes in TBKS

While the majority of the population continue to source their livelihood from subsistence activities (e.g., fisheries and agriculture) (Figure 2), there has been a declining trend in these activities since 2015, accompanied by employment growth in the service sector. While data on employment in fisheries and tourism sectors were not available, Figure 3 shows the changes between fishery production and the number of tourists between 2009 and 2019. The decline in fishery production (from approximately 29,000 tons/year to 21,500 tons/year between 2014 and 2018) may indicate a decline in fishery livelihoods or declining fish stocks, while the increasing number of tourists could partly explain the growth in the service sector in TBKS. The increase in tourist visits may have increased the incentives for local people to be engaged in work related to the tourism sector (including hotels, restaurants, personal services, and trades). However, our qualitative data presented below shows that these benefits may not have been captured by local communities and fishers in particular.

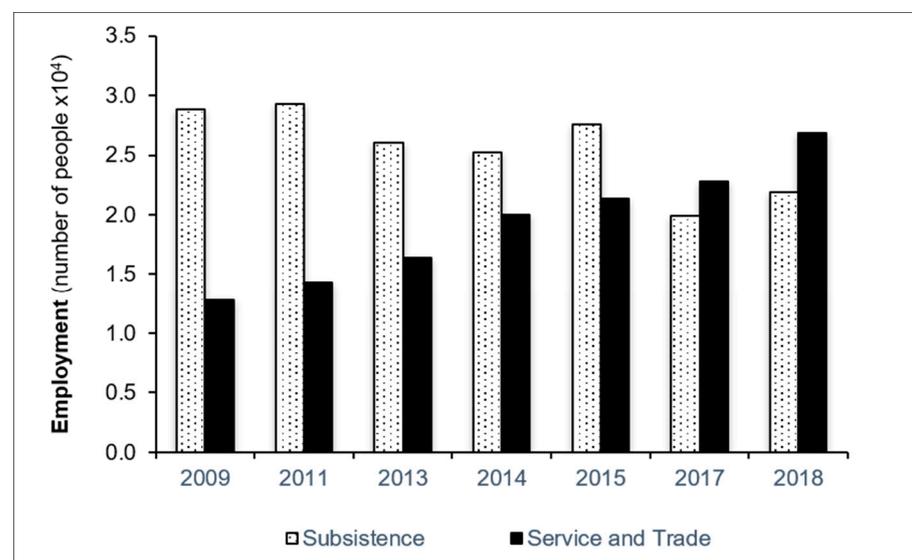


Figure 2. Employment profiles of the Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar population [26–30].

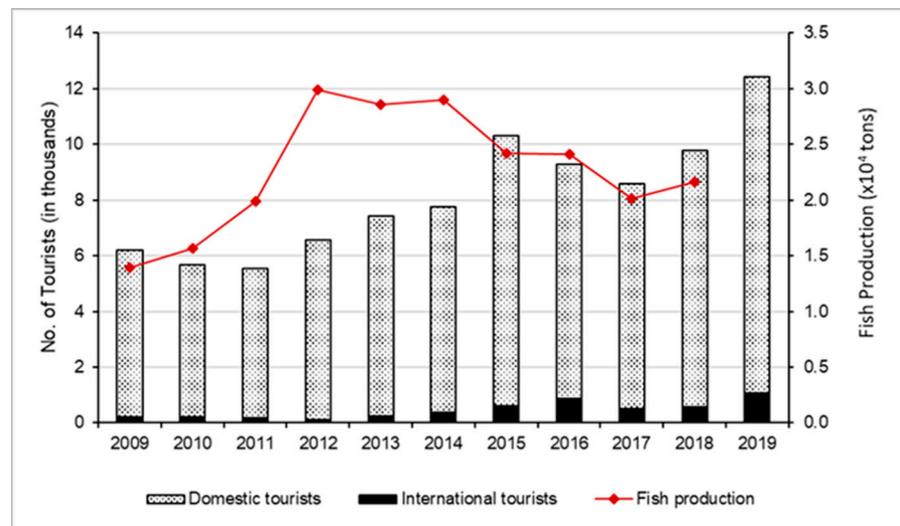


Figure 3. Annual number of incoming tourists and fish production in Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar [26–31].

4.2. Drivers to the Development of Tourism-Based Alternative Livelihoods

The timeline of the development of tourism-based livelihoods in TBKS (Figure 4) reveals a number of events and drivers that contributed to the changing employment profile.

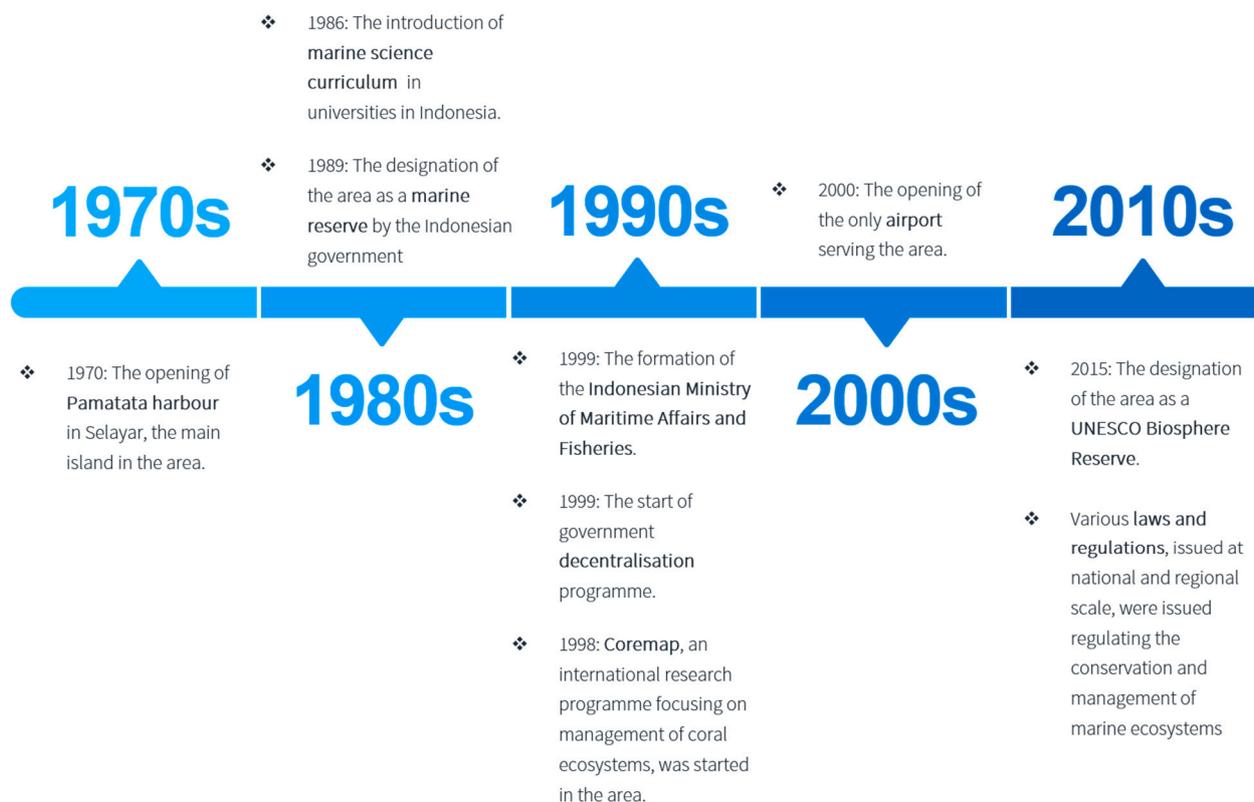


Figure 4. Key events in the history of tourism-based livelihood development in TBKS.

First, there has been substantial government investment in transportation infrastructure, with the building of ports and an airport connecting the area to major cities in Indonesia, such as Makassar and Jakarta, opening up the area to domestic and international tourists. The government has also developed renewable energy infrastructure, which has improved the

availability of electricity to increase both the productivity of local villagers and the tourism potential of the area. This was perceived by local-level focus groups to generate opportunities for diversifying livelihoods and thereby reducing the risk of the over-exploitation of coastal and marine resources. A participant from FGD 2 commented that:

“In some islands, the solar panels installed there have enabled local communities to divert towards more diverse economic activities, especially during the night time, so they can, for instance, open kiosks with attractive displays”.

Second, domestic and foreign tourism developers have invested in tourist resorts on many of the islands. Focus group participants said the incoming investment to the area was observed to significantly increase after decentralization in Indonesia began in 1999. For example, Law No. 6/2014 on Village was perceived by the same participant to increase the power of local communities to propose programs, manage budgets, and prioritize resources that can be utilized in their villages to enhance their tourism potential found in those villages. The tourism developers have invested in protecting coral reefs, the main local tourist attraction, through various initiatives, such as building artificial reefs to create future diving spots, and monitoring and reporting destructive fishing practices such as fish bombing.

Third, local community organizations, international NGOs, the government, and scientists have co-implemented conservation development programs that were perceived to increase the tourism potential of the area. The programs established marine protected areas, providing sites for tourists to visit, and developed the capacity of local communities for alternative livelihoods that support conservation efforts, including employment in nature-based tourism. For example, past conservation programs carried out in the area trained fishers as divers to conduct scientific monitoring which, according to a dive operator, resulted in those who completed the training becoming tourist dive guides. At local focus groups, participants expressed that there was growing recognition that tourism relied on nature-based attractions and therefore would benefit from sustained conservation efforts and sustainable livelihoods. As commented by a local government tourism official, tourism had been pursued to develop alternative livelihoods that are not destructive to the local ecosystems. The conservation-development programs also engaged communities to continuously participate in activities and regular dialogue at public forums about the adverse effects of destructive fishing on ecosystems and fishery production. The participating stakeholders agreed to implement several measures, including awareness-raising campaigns, the enforcement of local regulations for sustainable fishing gears, the establishment of fish catch quotas for each fishing community, and the design and designation of marine protected areas. This work aimed to disincentivize destructive fishing, but it is unclear if or how this affected the uptake of tourism-based livelihoods.

Fourth, participants said there was a general positive attitude towards tourism development within communities, as it was regarded as a source of alternative livelihood to diversify their source of income to reduce economic vulnerabilities, and as an alternative to engaging in destructive fishing practices. Nevertheless, conflicts between resort owners and fishers in the area were recurrent and resulted in boat clashes and trespassing. One participant stated that:

“Several guest houses and resorts developed by rich people—both Indonesians and foreigners. Some of the resorts are the most influential—want tourists to come so they protect their areas and stop fishermen coming into the transition zone (informally)”.

(Participant, FGD 5)

However, according to interviewed local government officials and affected fishers, the conflicts are dissipating and there is increasing cooperation between tourist operators and fishers. On some islands, for example, conflict resolution between resort management and fishers resulted in the creation of collective forums facilitating the involvement of fishers in tourism through a “boat hire for tourism” scheme. Through the dialogue, it was decided that in some areas, fishers would be provided financial incentives not to fish in key diving spots.

Thus, a series of diverse investments by the government and the private sector has supported the expansion of tourism in TBKS, while conservation-development programs have sought to build the capacity of and engage local communities in the livelihood opportunities of tourism, and to disincentivize destructive fishing. Communities have positive attitudes towards tourism, but the proceeding section identifies challenges to many community members accessing the benefits.

4.3. Barriers to the Development of Tourism-Based Alternative Livelihoods

Research participants discussed several barriers to tourism providing an alternative livelihood to local communities.

First, despite transportation and energy infrastructure development, communities still lack adequate amenities, such as supply of electricity and clean water, to meet the needs of domestic and international tourists. Travel within TBKS itself remains challenging—Selayar, for example, is at least 8 h by road and boat from the nearest major city of Makassar and can become isolated during the monsoon seasons when seafaring becomes dangerous. Moreover, although the airport provides access for tourists, flight costs were considered by some focus group participants to still be too expensive and infrequent because the perceived lack of incoming passengers deterred airlines from establishing routes to the region. A participant from FGD 3 perceived that:

“Tourism sector in the islands depends very much on the service provided by the transportation sector to ensure the efficiency of the time used by tourist to enter into the area. However, so far, many airlines seem to be reluctant to provide competitive ticket pricing and free luggage service that deters many tourists to enter small islands”.

Second, the low education attainment (less than 50% of the total population in the islands are educated above primary level [30]) and lack of language skills in small remote islands were said to prevent local people from taking up jobs in tourism and its connected service industries, and from transitioning out of the fisheries. A 22-year-old fisher commented that:

“My decision to work as a fisherman was driven by the inability of my family to fund higher education. However, if given the chance to study or work in another profession, such as resort worker or nurse, I would have taken it instead of fishing. I think the same conditions also happens with my peers in this village”.

Third, despite the efforts to combat destructive fishing practices, it remains an attractive activity for local people because of its economic benefits and the lack of fishery monitoring and enforcement around small remote islands. Local focus group participants also pointed out the short-term economic benefits of extracting resources from local ecosystems, such as sand and coral mining for building materials, which according to one participant was a problem that had not been addressed in past conservation-development programs. Thus, there is a lack of disincentives for engaging in destructive livelihoods, meaning there are no “push” factors to transition into tourism as an alternative.

Fourth, most of the financial benefits from tourism activities were perceived by local focus group participants to have been mostly captured by tourism developers and resort owners, who were often foreigners and migrants to the islands. In addition to communities receiving little benefit, fishers were aggrieved at being displaced by non-official marine protected areas that are privately managed and monitored by resort owners for exclusive use by their guests. Thus, there was a sentiment amongst community representatives that livelihood benefits had not reached their residents.

Finally, the promotion of tourism in TBKS was said by focus group participants to often be thwarted by the inertia of various government institutions. The participants argued that the issuance of redundant and frequently changing regulations caused some degree of consternation at the local level. Local focus group participants said this confusion was exacerbated by frequent changes in leadership within government institutions, which often resulted in the termination of existing programs, including those related to tourism

livelihoods. These conditions were said to lead to the withdrawal of support for community initiatives, such as citizen monitoring activities for destructive fishing practices, which resulted in apathy from some community members.

Thus, communities still face significant capacity challenges with the transition to tourism-based livelihoods. The private sector is not addressing these access barriers, and uncoordinated government policy and interventions do not create an adequate enabling environment for tourism to thrive. In the meantime, remaining in the fisheries and using destructive gear are still perceived to be attractive income-generation opportunities which are suitable to the skills of the communities, thus reducing the push to a transition to tourism.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study investigated the perceptions of the long-term drivers and barriers to the development of tourism as a source of alternative livelihoods for small island communities. The findings from TBKS highlight several critical insights for research and policy seeking to promote sustainable livelihoods for small island communities, within a broader context of governance transitions towards integrated marine planning and the blue economy.

In agreement with a previous study, those living on these small islands had positive attitudes and expectations of the benefits tourism could bring [4]. Perceived benefits included economic opportunities and livelihood diversification that reduce economic vulnerability. However, the study shows that community perceptions of tourism are heterogeneous with the displacement impacts of MPAs on fishers resulting in conflict—a well-documented outcome of marine conservation interventions [32,33]. The examples of financial compensation and employment of fishers by resorts shows that such conflict can be resolved through improved benefit sharing. In this case study, however, communities perceived that benefits are inadequately shared. Other studies have shown that the benefits of tourism and conservation can be captured more widely by elites [34–36] that have the financial, social, or intellectual capital to seize tourism opportunities [37–39]. If inequalities in the distribution of costs and benefits are not addressed, conflict and the lack of support towards such interventions can undermine their achievement of conservation and development goals [40,41]. Given the complex constellation of actors and other elements characterizing tourism development in small islands, as well as the necessity to involve impacted local communities from the early stage of development to ensure the equitable sharing of benefits, future studies might explore the potential utility of participatory action research to explore how these communities can be involved effectively.

However, our findings show that the more equitable sharing of benefits is challenged by barriers to members of small island communities transitioning to tourism-based livelihoods. The barriers ranged from marginalized small island communities lacking the skills and education needed to enter the industry, to the lack of basic amenities in communities to serve tourists. Similarly, in Kenya, women were unable to benefit from coastal tourism development because of gendered barriers to accessing education [42]. This result also suggests that transitioning to tourism from fisheries may be difficult for communities if basic needs have not been met, such as health, education, and food security. The focus on MPA establishment, training, and awareness raising through past programs in TBKS may therefore have been insufficient for enabling residents to take up more sustainable livelihoods. This agrees with emerging research showing that conservation-development programming can be more successful if basic needs and capabilities are developed in addition to more conservation learning activities [43,44].

Even if capabilities are strengthened, this study shows that community members may be unable or unwilling to reduce their participation in existing activities, including destructive fishing, by seeking employment in tourism. In agreement with Cinner et al. [45], the lack of fishers exiting the fisheries to pursue tourism livelihoods, despite negative fishery production trends, may be explained by the “capability” deficits described above. However, participants also commented that destructive fishing is (relatively) lucrative and there is weak enforcement of laws against it, making it attractive to remain in the

fisheries. In TBKS there are many reinforcing factors that sustain and make destructive fishing profitable, including high-value export markets and collusion amongst networks of fishers, traders, police, and suppliers of destructive materials that encourage fishers to maintain and expand operations [22]. Past empirical studies have also observed that even if they possess the necessary skills to transition, traditional communities are often unwilling to change their livelihood strategies [46–48]. In the fisheries, this has been linked to the strong identity and social status of fishing [49]. Thus, the hopes of local government and conservation programs that developing tourism as an alternative livelihood would provide incentives to reduce destructive and overfishing and protect local ecosystems may not be realized. This finding adds weight to the argument that the win-win narrative that (eco)tourism as an alternative livelihood will alleviate pressure and degradation of ecosystems is problematic in practice [1,50–52]. Yet, the findings of this study might only be most valid in small islands situated in developing countries. Therefore, generalization to other contexts should only be cautiously made.

Nevertheless, given the promotion of tourism as an antidote to the social costs of conservation [53–55], the learning history of TBKS provides important insights for policy and programming. These include the need to not only consider the overall costs and benefits of tourism development [2], but how to distribute costs and benefits equitably. Clearly, not all will similarly benefit or lose out, but the capabilities of local communities to participate and benefit from tourism can be strengthened rather than assuming that people will automatically receive the benefits from the development of tourism infrastructure. This study also highlights the need to consider both the push and pull factors for transitioning from unsustainable livelihoods, since the existence of more sustainable forms of alternative livelihoods might be inadequate to entice some community members away from destructive practices. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that environmentally sensitive tourism will have knock-on benefits for the environment. These conclusions reflect calls in the wider literature for environmentally and socially just tourism [55], and for collaborative marine planning. This would ensure that governance transitions towards the blue economy develop sectors carefully; prioritize local benefits; and nurture infrastructure, capabilities, rights, and institutions in order to deliver social, environmental, and economic goals [7].

Research Ethics Statement: Informed consents were obtained from all participants involved in the study. The protocol of this study was approved by University of Exeter Geography Ethics Committee (eCLESGeo000211 v8.0).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.A.P., C.M., M.F., L.G.; methodology, R.A.P., M.F., L.G., T.C., L.E.; formal analysis, R.A.P., C.M.; writing—original draft preparation, R.A.P., C.M., M.F., T.C.; writing—review and editing, M.F., T.C., L.E., L.G.; supervision, J.S.; funding acquisition, J.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Geography Ethics Committee of University of Exeter (eCLESGeo000211 v8.0, approved on 14 April 2019).

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical reasons.

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