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TO FISH OR NOT TO FISH: RODRIGO DE MOURA, ABROLHOS PROTECTOR

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By Marsha Johnston

The benefits of restricted fishing areas to the health of fish populations is a lesson Rodrigo de Moura, a Conservation International (CI) [marine protected areas](#) specialist, discovered for himself as a boy, spear-fishing off the Brazilian shore of Sao Paulo state, near the port city of Santos.

De Moura's father, a salesman for whom "diving was synonymous with weekends," taught his son to dive at the ripe old age of 10. "The Sao Paulo coast is very interesting and important for diving," de Moura says. "In the beginning we spear fished, but in the 1980s we realized a terrible thing – the fish were vanishing. So we stopped spear fishing, started a campaign for conservation, and helped to establish the first marine park in that area."

He adds that the park attracts manta rays every year to breed, and is one of the best places in the country to observe several of the Brazilian-endemic reef fishes.

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As part of that conservation campaign, de Moura and his father joined the Society for Defense of the Coast, which he says may have been the first marine NGO in [Brazil](#), and is still a CI [partner](#).

"No Take" Zones

Consequently, the challenge of convincing traditional [communities](#) of artisanal fisher folk on the central coast of Brazil why they should support a so-called "no-take" zone in the Corumbau Extractive Reserve came naturally to de Moura. Setting up the reserve in 2000 was part of the work of preserving the Abrolhos Bank, the southern Atlantic Ocean's largest and richest reef system, which the 37-year-old ichthyologist began 10 years ago as a consultant to CI.

"The most important part of our work in the region is to articulate the biological and ecological dimension of conservation along with the social, cultural and economic dimensions," de Moura says.

"How do we deal with poverty, population increases, coastal real estate development, wood pulp industry and shrimp farming, along with habitat protection and sustainable fisheries? It needs the engagement and a change of attitude from everyone, from the people in streets to the government. We must change the way we co-exist with sea. We have been on the wrong path."

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Educating the Fishers

Putting everyone on a sustainable path, de Moura adds, takes a long time, and requires communicating to the various communities in ways they understand.

When CI suggested that 20 square kilometers (7.7 square miles), or 20 percent of Corumbau's reefs be zoned as a no-take area, local fishermen were not familiar with how growing fish populations in no-take zones would spill over to other fishing areas.

Furthermore, approximately 70 percent of fishers cannot read or write. So de Moura and the Abrolhos team launched a challenge in 2000, teaching some fishermen to dive and to count fish, and showed slides that

illustrated the message. "Now most people living in the reserve get the message of how no-take zones benefit other zones," he says proudly.

While local fishers have learned to coexist with protected reefs, de Moura says, pressure continues to mount from far-flung industrial fishing fleets to exploit unprotected deep mid- and outer shelf reefs.

"For several fish, like snappers and groupers, their nursery habitats are the sea grass and estuaries, but their spawning aggregation is in the deep reefs [which] are an emerging concern for protecting fisheries," de Moura explains. "Large fish aggregate into specific structures to spawn, and as fishermen learn when and where, they are the main targets." He adds that industrial fleets increasingly use GPS systems to locate previously inaccessible reefs.

With most of the deep reefs uncharted, one of the primary research and science actions for the critical Abrolhos reef, says de Moura, is mapping the 50- to 90-meter-deep mid- and outer shelf environments, to help the government protect at least part of it.

The entire effort will take several years, but de Moura's roots on Brazil's coast run deep, and he intends to see the change through to the end: "We are not just here for a project and then to leave," he proclaims. "We are part of the community."

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