

# Ethics, faith-based and customary practices



Approaches using faith-based and customary practices aim to sensitise communities to the environmental ethic rooted in different faiths, customary laws and practices. They aim to affect attitudinal change, sustain change in behaviour towards the environment and complement existing forms of governance. They co-opt an individual's worldview as a way of bringing about behaviour change. The appropriateness of this strategy will vary according to the context in which it is being applied and can be dependent upon its 'fit' with current environmental thinking.

**Current strategies:** build on religious teachings and customary practices to support environmental education and sensitisation, the establishment of environmental protection zones, and the introduction of technical and administrative solutions. Such strategies can also strengthen the roles of religious and community leaders and give leverage to supporting institutions such as environmental NGOs.

**Assumptions:** For these approaches to be successful it is assumed that they are backed up by strong local community involvement and support for the conservation objectives. It is also assumed that the conservation objective can be met through customary practices contain an environmental ethic and can bring about change.

## Ecological impacts

### Positive

Documented evidence shows:

- Cases where almost immediate behaviour change occurred (e.g. stopping environmentally damaging activities such as dynamite fishing).
- Cases where natural resource use is sustainable where customary practices are still followed.

### Negative

No evidence was found that indicated that religious governance has a negative impact on the conservation of the resources in question, however there is evidence that:

- Functioning customary laws and practices/religious governance works best alongside appropriate technical solutions.

## Implications for ecological resilience

- Can bring about rapid change by reducing pressure on resources and result in more resilient ecosystems.

## Social impacts

### Positive

Documented evidence shows:

- There is greater voluntary compliance when conservation requirements are expressed in terms of values that are important to local communities.
- Building on custom and practice and co-opting deeply held values can contribute to co-management of common pool resources and the creation of social capital.
- Faith leaders can inspire stakeholder collaboration and support environmental awareness and education.
- Individuals outside of a religious or customary group can be co-opted by emphasising commonality of ethical values

### Negative

Evidence shows that:

- Declining resource availability, privatisation of access rights, shifting governance structures and economic hardships put pressure on customary use and practice.
- Individuals outside of a religious or customary group can be marginalised, despite being important stakeholders.

## Implications for social resilience

- Can build social capital.
- Can make an important contribution to co-management.
- Suitable for multi-faith groups provided common ground can be found. A sensitive approach can produce good results.
- Sensitive approach needed to bring about the introduction of cross-cutting values between different faith groups.

**Spatial scale:** Local to the conservation context.

**Temporal scale:** Immediate to longer-term.

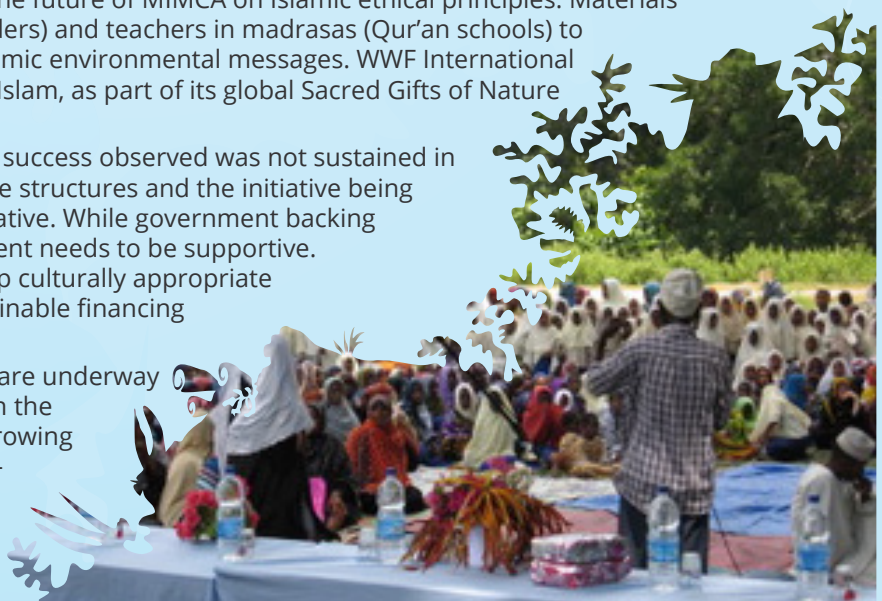
## Case study: Misali Island Marine Conservation Zone, Zanzibar

Misali is a small, uninhabited island off the coast of Pemba in the Zanzibar archipelago. In 1998, Misali Island Marine Conservation Area (MIMCA) was established to protect the coral reefs around the island. At this time, the area provided a source of livelihood to an estimated 1,640 fishers supporting over 11,000 people from 35 coastal shehias or villages in Pemba. Declining fish stocks and shrinking catches meant that some fishers had resorted to dynamiting reefs to extract more fish but resulting in long-lasting damage to the reef ecosystem. After limited success of years of technical conservation methods, the Zanzibar Commission for Natural Resources (no longer in existence) agreed to test the application of customary Islamic principles for the management of the conservation area. In 1999 the UK faith-based organisation, IFEES (the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences) conducted a pilot workshop involving the fishing community, religious leaders and government officials to explore the environmental ethic enshrined in Islam. A second workshop was held in early 2001 involving deeper study of the Qur'an. Aspects of the Sharia (religious law that forms part of the Islamic tradition) related to conservation were examined. It was proposed that the conservation area should be designated a hima (conservation or strictly protected zone) in accordance with the conservation and sustainability principles embodied in the Sharia.

**Has it been successful?** Using the Qur'an as a teaching resource sensitised stakeholders in a matter of days compared to the poor results from the standard approaches. Blast fishing stopped almost immediately, offering protection to the coral reefs. The NGOs involved in Misali, supported by CNR and the office of the Mufti of Zanzibar decided to base the future of MIMCA on Islamic ethical principles. Materials were developed for imams (prayer leaders) and teachers in madrasas (Qur'an schools) to support wider dissemination of the Islamic environmental messages. WWF International accepted the Misali project as a Gift of Islam, as part of its global Sacred Gifts of Nature Programme.

**Challenges facing the project:** the initial success observed was not sustained in the long-run due to weak administrative structures and the initiative being subsumed by a wider government initiative. While government backing is needed for such initiatives, government needs to be supportive. This includes access to funds to develop culturally appropriate resources. In their absence other sustainable financing mechanisms are needed.

**Future application:** similar approaches are underway in Madagascar and Indonesia, based on the Islamic environmental ethic. There is growing momentum globally in the role of faith-based organisations and approaches in dealing with biodiversity loss and unsustainable resource use.



## Further reading

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