
*Articles***Stigmatized Property, Clams, and Community in Coastal Ecuador**Laura Kuhl¹, Michael J. Sheridan²

San Felipe is a village on the coast of Ecuador known for collecting clams from mangroves. Being a clam collector is a highly marginalized occupation in the region, and as such, the concheros of San Felipe are socially stigmatized. Based on an analysis of the interplay of ecological and social conditions, we describe a form of property and means of controlling rights to natural resources which we call stigmatized property. Access to stigmatized property is maintained not through active management within a social group but by the stigma associated with the use of the resource imposed by outsiders. Drawing on Eric Wolf's concept of the Closed Corporate Peasant Community, as well as post-structuralist political ecology and common property studies, we analyze the social characteristics of a stigmatized property system. By documenting the connections among individual identities, gender and kinship relations, community institutions and the regional political economy, we show the historical development of a stigmatized property system and the advantages and vulnerabilities it entails. The recent development of shrimp farms in the area destroyed most of the mangroves, but the social dynamics of stigmatized property persist. Although the concheros of San Felipe are becoming less closed, corporate, and community-oriented now that they no longer collect clams, they are still heavily stigmatized and largely invisible to the Ecuadorean state. We conclude that resource management analyses and policies should recognize how stigma can shape property rights systems.

Keywords: clams, Ecuador, property rights, stigma, common property, *Anadara tuberculosa*, *Anadara similis*

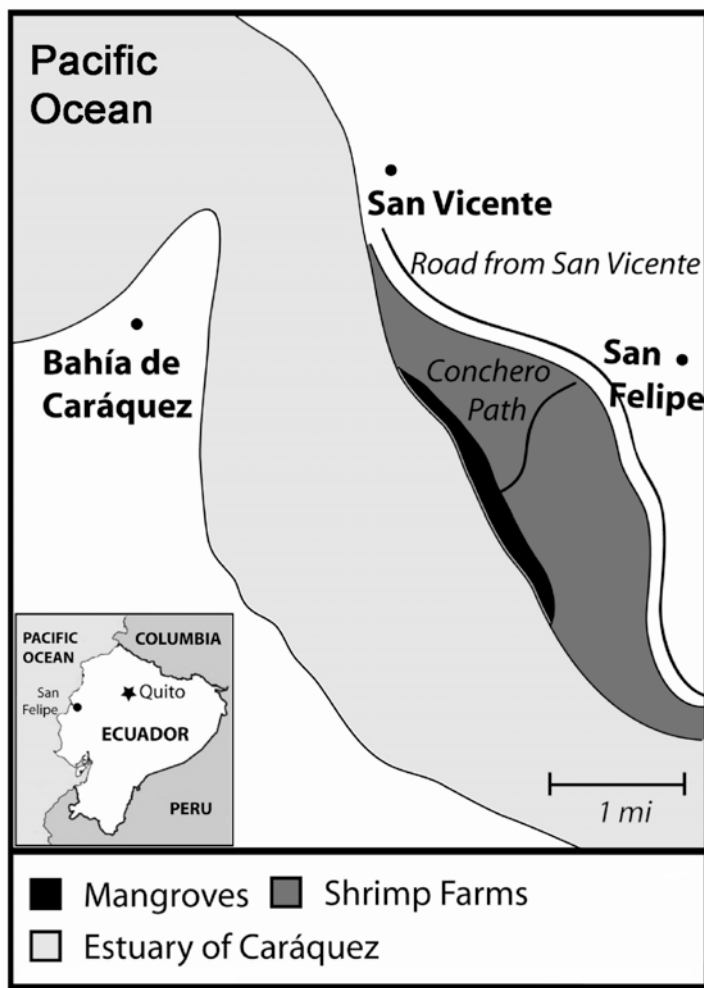
Introduction

San Felipe is a small village in Manabí, Ecuador, a coastal province famous for its *concheros* (clam collectors, see Map 1). The entrance to the community is marked by a small, broken, hand-painted sign proclaiming “*Sitio San Felipe*.” Apart from this sign, only a small covered bench is visible. The single dusty road is silent and unlike neighboring fishing villages, nobody greets visitors with a cheerful smile. The few children playing in the street with a deflated soccer ball are polite, but painfully shy. In the center of the village stands the focal point of San Felipe. Painted white, the side of the building boldly proclaims in red lettering “*La Concha Prieta*.” This building hosts the *Asociación Concha Prieta*, San Felipe’s fisherman’s association and the only formal institution in the community. Next to the *Asociación Concha Prieta*, there is a soccer field and a makeshift convenience store, but these form the only communal structures in the village. The small village of 60 households has no schools or clinics and the *concheros* must

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travel to nearby San Vicente for any services. There are six family groups in San Felipe, which while distinct, are thoroughly woven together by intermarriage. Through marriage ties, most people can claim membership in four of the five key groups, which provides a strong network for accessing social and economic resources.

During the fall of 2005, upon learning that Laura Kuhl was interested in clams, the empty village center was instantly filled with an enthusiastic crowd. The boarded windows of *La Concha Prieta* were flung open, and *concheros* gathered, bringing small handfuls of *conchas* with them as they shared stories of the days when the village feasted upon buckets of *conchas*. San Felipe is famous for collecting *conchas*, clams that grow in the mangroves. Now, 90 percent of the mangroves are gone due to the development of shrimp farms (CLIRSEN 1990) and the inhabitants of San Felipe can no longer depend on *conchas* for a living – yet it remains the village of *concheros*. Without the *conchas*, making a living is precarious in San Felipe. Some people fish for wild shrimp, others are day laborers for a construction company hauling sand from a nearby beach, and some work seasonally for the shrimp farms. For the people who live in San Felipe, being a *conchero* is much more than an occupation; it has profound implications for identity and community organization as well.



Map 1: The Estuary of Caráquez

It has been widely documented that tropical shrimp farms cause environmental degradation both directly through water pollution and hydrological changes, and indirectly through mangrove deforestation (Algoni 2001, Cruz-Torres 2000, Quarto et al. 1996, Southgate 1992, Tobey et al. 1998). Investigators have also explored the social costs of shrimp farming, often framed in terms of social conflict, economic inequality, and the transformation of property regimes (Cooley 1999, Goss et al. 1998, Guest 1999, Phillips 1988). However, there has been little scholarship on community reactions to shrimp farm development. Communities are described as the passive victims of outside forces (Olson 2005), while less attention is given to the ways that changing resource patterns shift internal structures and dynamics. We seek to advance the critical literature on tropical shrimp farms by analyzing the relationship between natural resource use, identity, and community organization in a coastal Ecuadorian village.

This analysis draws on two scholarly frameworks to address the relationship between communities and resources: post-structuralist political ecology and common property studies. Through an emphasis on symbols and culture in the analysis of power and resource use, post-structuralist political ecology shows that forms of community regulation and access to resources interact with identity, malleable identities are used by different constituencies for particular interests, and images of community can be used to negotiate forms of property and access to resources. Therefore, analyses need to be sensitive to both internal and external dynamics of social and ecological units because no community is homogeneous or isolated (Watts and Peet 2004, Paulson et al. 2004). Furthermore, we must proceed with caution when using “community” as the basic unit of ecological analysis because communities are both internally differentiated and the results of particular historical processes (Agrawal and Gibson 1999, Wolf 1957). When we understand that power and identity are often negotiated through resource use, it becomes clear why identity, community and resource use must be analyzed together in order to understand resource use and social change in coastal Ecuador.

The common property literature adds to political ecology by offering an in-depth understanding of the regulatory systems, knowledge, and practices that allow different forms of access to resources and property rights to develop. Common property management combines the characteristics of public and private property systems, which make it more institutionally complex (Becker and Ostrom 1995), yet scholars have demonstrated that diverse common property systems can maintain both societies and ecosystems (Acheson 1988, 2006, Burke 2001, Dietz et al. 2003, Guest 2003, McCay and Acheson 1987, Orcés 1999, Ostrom 2000, Swaney 1990). Common property systems are usually more successful in small communities with robust norms of resource use (Acheson 1988, 2003). Common property research has shown how local social institutions mediate the relationship between communities and resources, and is therefore a focal point of sustainability science (Stonich and Mandell 2007).

A common challenge faced by analysts in both frameworks is the tendency to view communities as bounded units rather than dynamic processes. We need to discard the traditional view of community as a defined space (Olson 2005, Watts and Peet 2004) and understand it as an ideological and material process. Mead (1934) defines community as the social processes people engage in, through which they form bonds with individuals and groups. Rather than presupposing the existence of community, Mead argues that people form community acting “purposefully in response to their conceptions of connections among themselves” (Wilkinson

1991:15). Shared values, especially when they are different than those of other groups, help to form cohesive social wholes (Durkheim 1893, MacTaverish and Salamon 2001). Rather than presupposing the existence of an essentialized “community,” we posit that community is an emergent property of social interaction; in this case, people’s interactions about access to and the meanings of mangroves and clams. In our case, the clam collectors demonstrate a strong sense of what Durkheim called “mechanical solidarity,” the cohesion that results from social homogeneity, and which characterizes small-scale societies. This contrasts with the “organic solidarity” of societies based on hierarchy and domination. Unlike Durkheim, however, our analysis sees solidarity as a consequence of social action and not its cause. As described below, the nature of solidarity in San Felipe is in transition.

Eric Wolf (1957, 2001) provides a tool for understanding the relationships between Latin American community formation, identity, and resource use as interlocked and negotiated processes. A group’s sense of community can be seen as the historical product of particular political and economic forces. Wolf describes a social formation that he calls the “closed corporate peasant community” (CCPC). A CCPC forms when peasants are exploited for their labor, but are barred from direct participation in capital accumulation. The colonizers seize control of large-scale trade, which deprives the native population of access to sources of wealth and forces them to draw the majority of their subsistence from their own small plots of land. A CCPC can be seen as a long-term defensive response to colonization. In CCPCs, land tenure is often communal and is tightly controlled because the community is dependent on the scarce land left them by the colonists for subsistence. Members who leave cannot inherit land, and membership is restricted to people born within the boundaries of the CCPC. This resource management strategy not only excludes outsiders, but also limits the flow of outsiders’ ideas into the community, creating social and cultural isolation and inducing members to content themselves with “shared poverty” (Wolf 1957:2). Wolf argues that these patterns only appear as traditionalism, but are actually rational local responses to larger social processes. In the context of environmental vulnerability and social inequality, these patterns spread risks and strengthen the bonds within a community. In a CCPC the social network within the community is one of the only defenses it has against larger structures of domination and exploitation³.

Within the common property literature, rights of access and control over resources are generally categorized into four property types: private, state owned, open access, and common property (Ostrom 2000). None of these four categories accurately accounts for San Felipe’s relationship with the mangroves. The key to understanding both people and mangroves in San Felipe is a new type of property system which we call “stigmatized property.” Unlike private, state or common property, stigmatized property is not a matter of ownership. Like common property, stigmatized property is held in common by a group, but it does not need to be actively defended. Instead, stigmatized property is managed through the role of stigma. Stigma takes small differences and makes them essential to the relationships between individuals and the rest of society. It is both phenomenological and structural, causing people to be viewed as less than

³ For an example of recent extension and revision of Wolf’s CCCP in the context of a Latin American peasant community, see the work of Thomas Sheridan on northwestern Mexico (1988). Sheridan’s approach to the CCCP focuses on communities of interest and resource use, rather than the communities of place and identity described here.

human and limiting their social and economic opportunities (Goffman 1963). The terms of access are, at best, socially risky, so they become *de facto* terms of control. The boundaries of stigmatized property are imposed by outsiders' perceptions of resource users rather than through active management. The *concheros* of San Felipe held exclusive access to the *conchas* of the estuary not because they owned them, or even defended their rights to use them, but because the use of the resource was (and is) intimately connected to their deeply stigmatized identity. As an environmental lawyer from the region expressed this essentialized linkage between low-status resources and low-status human bodies, "it's in their blood to be *concheros*."⁴

Our analysis begins not with a discussion of rights, as political ecology would frame it, or management, as the common property literature would frame it, but with an exploration of identity, because it is identity, not rights or management, that organizes resource use for the *concheros* of San Felipe. To analyze the development of community solidarity, identity, and resource management in San Felipe, we begin by describing the relationship between a particular *conchera* and the mangroves. We then address the implications of this resource use for social status and identity. Finally, we explore the implications for community organization and institutional efficacy.

Methods

This analysis is largely based on Kuhl's fieldwork in San Felipe, Ecuador in November 2005 and May - June 2006. Fieldwork consisted of participant observation and fifty interviews with *concheros* and fishermen in San Felipe and other fishing villages including the nearby villages of Los Perales, Portovelo, Leonidas Plazas and Puerto Ebano, as well as government officials and community leaders in many of the surrounding communities. Interviews included questions regarding the history of *concha*-collecting, the market for *conchas*, community institutions and governance, general history of the community, family background and personal experiences with mangroves and *conchas*, current economic opportunities and livelihoods, and aspirations for the future. In addition, four focus groups consisting of representatives from most households in San Felipe, including men, women and some children, created kinship diagrams and maps of the Caráquez estuary showing current and historical resource use patterns. In the focus groups, participants were encouraged to map local place names in the mangroves, areas of past and current resource use, and develop a kinship diagram for all members of the community from the founding to the present. A comprehensive census of San Felipe was also conducted. Perhaps more important than the planned research was a development project that emerged out of Kuhl's fieldwork. By helping to organize a new common property resource (a public water supply), Kuhl gained insight into how identity and stigma continue to shape resource management.

Identity and the Commons

Once the greatest *conchera* in the region, Mariana is still one of the most influential members of her community. Although only 55 years old, her body shows the strain of years of hard work. But when Mariana smiles, there is a determination and perseverance that shine through her desperate circumstances. Mariana has spent much of her life deep in the mangroves, searching

⁴ "Es su sangre ser conchero." For an analysis of a similar relationship between cultural models and production in a fishing community, see Pálsson 1991.

for the area's most commercially valuable resource. One hundred *conchas* sell for three to five US dollars, depending on size and quality – not a high price, but more than you can make in a day of fishing in San Felipe⁵. Two species (*Anadara tuberculosa* and *A. similis*) are known as the *concha prieta*, a bivalve mollusk, approximately two to eight centimeters in length. It is known in English as a “bloody cockle” or “arkshell” (MacKenzie 2001).

It has been six years since Mariana has gone to the mangroves, but her boots still sit clean and ready in the kitchen closet. She may no longer collect *conchas*, but she is still a *conchera*. Collecting *conchas* is physically demanding and time consuming, especially now that several kilometers of shrimp farms stretch between San Felipe and the mangroves. The shrimp farms were built in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and since then *concheros* have continued to try to collect *conchas*, but with the loss of mangroves, the fishery has collapsed and very few *concheros* can still make a living. To get to the mangroves, Mariana must cross the highway and follow a small dirt trail that pokes out from the underbrush. A path winds past shrimp farms for about three kilometers before coming to a little cove where the *concheros* keep their canoes. To gather *conchas* from among the mangrove roots, *concheros* thrust their hands deep into the mud and feel for the clams, often sinking down to their knees. In many areas, they crawl on hands and feet through the stinking mud, reaching between roots and branches for the elusive mollusks.

It may have been years since Mariana was in the mangroves, but she is at home there. As she moves through the mangroves, her hands appear to gravitate toward the *conchas*, plucking them from beneath the mud. Watching Mariana step from the canoe into the mangroves is like watching someone come alive. From this large old woman's tired body emerges a graceful dancer, weaving among the mangrove roots, ducking and swaying, matching her rhythm to the structure around her. In moments like this, there is no doubt that being a *conchera* reaches deep into the core of Mariana's being and always will. She is hardworking and determined, outspoken and confident – but only in San Felipe. Like the mangroves, she is resilient, but like her beloved *conchas*, she has suffered enormously. Mariana now sells perfumes, soaps and other beauty products door-to-door in San Vicente several days a week. The work is degrading and embarrassing, and every time Mariana returns from San Vicente, she seems not only exhausted but spiritually drained.

⁵ It would be interesting to explore whether *conchas* have always received a higher value than fish in the region, or if this is a recent phenomenon based on the current scarcity. If they have always had a higher value, this would reinforce the socio-cultural components of *conchas* as a stigmatized resource and demonstrate that economic valuation is not always sufficient for determining the resource use choices individuals and communities make.



Photo 1; Mariana in the mangroves collecting *conchas*.
Photo by Laura Kuhl, June 2006.



Photo 2: A *conchera* selling *conchas* in the market.
Photo by Laura Kuhl, June 2006.

Although Mariana's life as a *conchera* has been hard, Mariana's memories of collecting *conchas* are happy. Her mother taught her to be a *conchera*. With a smile in her eyes, Mariana's voice softens as she recalls her youth. When she was a tiny child, her mother would take her out into the mangroves. "When I was a little girl," she says, "when my mom collected *conchas*, I slept in the mangroves. I could collect one or two, until little by little, I collected more and more until I could collect hundreds."⁶ From the age of 12, Mariana was providing the income to feed her family of nine siblings and her mother. Mariana recalls when the mangroves extended throughout the estuary and everyone in San Felipe was a *conchero*. Entire families traveled to the mangroves every day to gather *conchas*. In Mariana's memory, it was a time of abundance and community solidarity. In Mariana's words, "everything was tranquil; it was a good life – hard, but good. Even though it was difficult, it was good because we were together and we were *concheros*."⁷ Mariana's socialization as a *conchera* was not simply a matter of learning language and culture; it was about learning to become part of a social-ecological system.

Mariana would not have become a *conchera* if it were not for the mangroves, yet she did not stop being a *conchera* when she stopped collecting *conchas*. When Mariana reminisces about the days of *concha* abundance, her *conchera* identity gives her great pride, but when she is beyond the safety San Felipe, it causes great shame. Because she carries her identity as a *conchera* with her wherever she goes, whether it is to San Vicente to sell beauty products, or in the village cooking dinner for her family, the destruction of the mangroves hinders Mariana's ability not only to collect *conchas*, but to express herself as a productive person within a social system that has classified her as the lowest of the low. To understand the impacts of shrimp farm development in the Estuary of Caráquez, it is not enough to know that 4,000 hectares were deforested (CLIRSEN 1990), you must know Mariana and understand her story.

The Stigma of Being a *Conchero*

The *concheros* share an estuary with other fishing communities, and their village may look just like any other in coastal Ecuador, but San Felipe is unique because of the stigma associated with *concha* collecting. Fishing is poor in the estuary, and it is actually possible to make more money as a *conchero* than as a fisherman. Regardless, most fishermen continue to fish unsuccessfully rather than collect *conchas*. From an economic perspective, it would be in their interest to collect *conchas*, but the social costs outweigh the economic benefits. The fishermen in Los Perales, a village neighboring San Felipe, are quick to assert that there are no *concheros* in their community, even though several *conchero* families do live there. The mere presence of *concheros* in the community would tarnish the village's reputation as an upstanding fishing community. As one fisherman indignantly stated, "We are fishermen. There aren't any *concheros* here. All of the *concheros* are in San Felipe!"⁸ Outside of San Felipe, *concheros* are not allowed to join fishermen's associations, the primary social institution in most coastal

⁶ "Cuando era ninita, cuando mi madre cojieron conchas, yo dormí en los manglares. Cojí una o dos, y poco a poco, cojí más y más hasta que pudo cojer cientos."

⁷ "Todo era tranquilo; era un buen vida- dura, pero bueno. Aunque era difícil, estaba bien, porque estábamos juntos y estábamos concheros."

⁸ "Somos pesdadores. No hay ningún conchero aquí. Todos los concheros viven en San Felipe."

Ecuadorian villages, and are relegated to the outskirts of the villages. They are not allowed to store their boats on the beach with other fishermen and are ineligible for loans and other benefits the fishermen's associations can offer. Unlike the fishermen who stroll confidently through the streets of Los Perales and other fishing villages, the *concheros* stay quietly in their homes. This stigma functions in many ways like a caste system in coastal Ecuador, limiting the social and economic opportunities of individuals based on the status of their occupation.

San Felipe demonstrates many of the characteristics Wolf describes for marginalized Latin American CCPCs. San Felipe is marginalized because it is the only community in the Manabí area that collects *conchas*, and this resource use strategy carries a heavy social cost. San Felipe's solidarity as a CCPC is, in part, a defensive reaction to both structural poverty and the stigma associated with collecting *conchas*. Because this stigma makes it harder for *concheros* to associate with the outside world, internal ties become more important. The strategy of being a specialized CCPC helps insulate the *concheros* from the direct material effects of stigma by converting a low-status activity into a de facto property regime. The social costs of collecting *conchas* are much lower for *concheros* in San Felipe than they are for outsiders, allowing the *concheros* of San Felipe exclusive access to a resource others avoid because it is too socially detrimental. With the development of shrimp farms in the estuary in the late 1980s, however, the stigma experienced by San Felipe no longer provides the benefits it did when *conchas* were abundant.

Several characteristics lead *concha* collecting, like shore-based fisheries throughout the world, to be stigmatized (Meltzoff 1995). It is physically demanding and dirty work. Because each *concha* must be hand-selected, *conchas* have a low profit margin. As a result, generally only those that can't afford to invest in more profitable industries collect *conchas*. However, one of the benefits of shellfisheries and other shore-based fisheries is that the collectors control the means of production, namely canoes, boots and gloves. There is no need for investment in capital-intensive equipment like boats or nets, which can limit the independence of the fisher (Meltzoff 1995). Many cultures differentiate between off-shore and shore-based fisheries. Off-shore fishing is men's work because fishermen are often away from home for a long time and fish serve as the primary economic base for a family, while shore-based fisheries are reserved for women because the products are used for household consumption and can be collected with children on hand (McCay 2001). Guest's (2002) study of fishing communities in Esmeraldas demonstrates that these global patterns apply in Ecuador as well. Fishing is exclusively the domain of men while women specialize in onshore fisheries and support activities such as marketing.

This gendered division of labor reinforces gender inequality by limiting women to socially stigmatized roles. A study of mangrove-dependent communities in the Esmeraldas province of Ecuador found that of all fishing occupations including shrimp, lobster, white fish, oysters and *conchas*, collecting *conchas* was the most socially marginalized, and even in very poor communities, only women collected *conchas* (Orcés 1999). The *concheros* of San Felipe, like many others in the Estuary of Caráquez, migrated from the Esmeraldas region, and as such came from a tradition where women collect *conchas*. San Felipe is unique among neighboring villages because most men consider themselves *concheros*. Elsewhere in the Estuary of Caráquez, few men would accept the social stigma associated with doing "women's work." This labor pattern

makes power relations more egalitarian in San Felipe than in neighboring fishing villages. San Felipe's men and women share the social stigma of *concha* collecting, and this unusual gender equality further reinforces the community's stigma in the region.

Gender and kinship are, like two sides of a piece of paper, inseparable aspects of social organization (Collier and Yanagisako 1987). Not surprisingly, kinship patterns and *concha* collecting are deeply interconnected in San Felipe. Collecting *conchas* is a social activity that demonstrates and reinforces kinship ties. As Mariana described, whole families used to go out together, and parents taught their children to search for *conchas* in the thick mud of the mangroves. Throughout Ecuador, shore-based fisheries are highly social activities that facilitate interaction and solidarity within fishing communities. The most common work group is the family, although friendship and age groups also shape labor organization (Guest 2002). Although fishing in Ecuador is generally a family occupation, the kin-based nature of work is stronger for *concheros* because whole families participate, not only the male members. The gender roles associated with *concha* collecting reinforce the equitable kinship patterns within the community and its capacity to maintain its social cohesion. In this way, San Felipe's mechanical solidarity as a CCPC and its resource use comprise a self-organizing system on the ecological and social margins of coastal Ecuador. We cannot isolate any one factor in San Felipe's circumstances of resource use, stigma, poverty, and solidarity as causative. Rather, these are all parts of a mutually reinforcing process.

Strong kinship ties and endogamous marriage patterns help San Felipe reinforce its closed corporate status. The village was founded in the 1950s by a pair of brothers and their wives. Although this was several generations ago, every current member of the community can be linked directly to the founding family. There have been some immigrants into San Felipe, but all married an authentic *conchero* who was a descendent of one of these two founding couples. Marrying outside of San Felipe is not viewed as an opportunity to expand one's social horizons, rather is viewed as a denial of community and these emigrants lose their status as *concheros*. The practice of *criados*, in which grandparents or other family members adopt their neighbors' children if they have the means, highlights the level of dedication to family in San Felipe and is one of many techniques the community uses to reinforce the social bonds and networks of reciprocity necessary for maintaining a CCPC. This behavior is typical of Wolf's characterization of a CCPC as a social unit in which membership is constrained and marriage into an existing family is one of the only ways to gain entrance. The advantage of bounding a community in this way is that scarce resources are preserved. As it is, the mangroves no longer provide for San Felipe, and the community has very few other resources to draw upon. It does not have the luxury of expansion. The close kinship ties reinforce San Felipe's closed corporate status, and preserve scarce resources, but they also make it difficult for San Felipe to adapt to new social and ecological conditions.

In a community where almost everyone collected *conchas* and men and women worked together, the labor process dependent on stigmatized property prevented the patriarchal logic of coastal Ecuadorian culture from taking hold in San Felipe. In addition, because men and women gathered *conchas* together, a clearly defined division of labor never developed, and domestic relations were characterized by partnership rather than hierarchy. Kinship and gender patterns

in San Felipe are not independent variables, but are both causes and consequences of a history of stigmatized resource use.

In contrast to the marginalized position coastal Ecuadorian society places on San Felipe, within San Felipe there is an emphasis on equality. Almost as many women have served as president of the fishing association as men, and many women are more highly educated than the men. *Concheros* are not physically isolated on the edges of the village, and in fact, there is great hesitation to even differentiate between community members based on their occupation. Looking out at the whole village and gesturing with pride, a *conchero* said that San Felipe is different from other places because “*concheros* and fishermen, women and men, all are equal here.”⁹ This statement reflects an egalitarian social norm that is different from the dominant culture of class hierarchy in the region. While community members may speak with pride about the equality that results from the shared burden of *conchero* stigma, in reality, there are many differences between the power exercised by men and women, and certain families have significantly more power than others in San Felipe.¹⁰ Additionally, with the recent loss of mangroves and consequent shift away from economic dependence on *conchas*, most of the emerging job opportunities (such as day labor extracting sand for far-off construction projects) are only available for men. San Felipe may be in the middle of a transition from a fairly egalitarian community organization toward the more dominant patriarchal organization common in coastal Ecuador. As these relationships change, there is a growing gap between the discourse of equality and the emerging hierarchy in San Felipe.

Being a *conchero* has remained economically viable for few people since the development of the shrimp farms in the 1980s, but the majority of people in San Felipe still self-identify as *concheros* and would like their children to be *concheros*. Why has this activity remained so central to community identity, even though economically it is almost obsolete? Taylor (1981) offers insight into the continuing ideological salience of fisheries work. In his analysis of an Irish fishing community, Taylor concluded that fishing expresses community values and maintains social organization. Because economic activities play an essential role in shaping experience, economic institutions have a particularly powerful capacity to serve as sites for ritualized performances that organize communities, even when the institutions no longer serve their original economic purposes.

The strength of community as a social construct depends on how clearly boundaries are created and maintained (Barth 1969). Using the social stigma associated with *concha* collecting as a focal point of community-building helps to reinforce the difference between San Felipe and the outside world. This is especially important in coastal Ecuador, where communities typically do not have a strong sense of group identity (Guest 1999). Maintaining clear boundaries by continuing to collect *conchas* – or just to talk about collecting them – is the most important way that San Felipe re-creates and rehearses community solidarity. However, this socially

⁹ “Concheros y pescadores, mujeres y hombres, todos son iguales aquí.”

¹⁰ Although *concheros* in San Felipe strongly assert that all *concheros*, regardless of gender are equal, it would be interesting to further explore the stigma others outside the community place on men and women. Are men more stigmatized for doing “women’s work” and collecting *conchas*?

constructed boundary is further reinforced by geographic boundaries. Although a mere 20-minute walk from the bustling center of San Vicente, San Felipe is remote. The steep hills that surround San Felipe effectively limit any expansion. Although the residents of San Felipe have frequent contact outside of the community, discussion of any journey, even if it is just an errand to town, is framed in terms of “going away.” Although physical isolation reinforces this boundary, the stigma associated with being *concheros* is the primary source of boundary maintenance for the community. While the *concheros* of San Felipe developed as a CCPC in response to their need for solidarity in a marginalized position in coastal Ecuadorian society, they have reframed the source of their stigma as a reason for pride and a continued sense of purpose for their community after the loss of their mangroves.

The Implications of Stigma

The stigma and isolation of being *concheros* may have been fundamental to San Felipe’s development and maintenance as a community, but it came at great cost. Daily, the *concheros* must contend with a bureaucratic system that developed without their participation. From the very beginning of Laura Kuhl’s fieldwork, San Felipe’s social invisibility was obvious. For the first week of her visit, no one in San Vicente would tell her just where the village was located, even though it was common knowledge that San Felipe was the area’s main *conchero* village. However, when she became involved with a project to provide San Felipe with running water, the implications of stigma and invisibility on the daily lives of *concheros* in San Felipe became highly apparent.

Laura Kuhl walked into the municipal building of San Vicente and found a little office piled high with papers, giving the room a sense of bureaucratic accomplishment. She asked about the feasibility of a public water works project in San Felipe. One engineer said he thought he had been there once, a couple of years ago, but thought it was about an hour’s bus ride away. Another man started searching for a map on an ancient computer, but could not find one. Laura Kuhl suggested that they take a short walk so that the engineers could see the village for themselves, but no one left their desks. Due to their marginalized social position and the *concheros*’ survival strategy as a CCPC, San Felipe has remained mostly invisible to the state. In order for states to control their populations, as well as provide benefits, people must be organized into “legible,” map-able, and predictable systems (Scott 1998). In this respect, both the Ecuadorian government and the *concheros* have failed to see and be seen. In this case, the informal nature of stigmatized property simultaneously entails high symbolic visibility (in that the low-status *concheros* are well known throughout the region) and low political visibility.

The *concheros*’ stigmatized position can be seen not only in bureaucratic systems, but also through thoroughly routinized discrimination. Through their disparaging attitudes toward the *concheros*, even the officials responsible for the welfare of San Felipe effectively silenced the voices of even the most locally influential *concheros*. When the engineer from the municipal water department eventually came to San Felipe, he spoke only to Laura Kuhl, the high-status foreign researcher, and would not address any of the local leaders or even look them in the eye. Although these leaders knew their own community’s needs, in her easily legible role as San Felipe’s patron and a “wealthy American,” Laura Kuhl was placed in the position of negotiating a new relationship between the *concheros* and the state. The *concheros*’ reliance on a patron to

speak for them regarding matters of great importance demonstrates the ineffectiveness of their strategy as a CCPC.

Being a CCPC provided the *concheros* with advantages in terms of community solidarity and sense of identity. The benefits of this mechanical solidarity were apparent when mangroves were stigmatized resource areas. However, if the *concheros* are to build a different, less stigmatized sense of community as part of a state organized by the organic solidarity of representative governance and service provision, they will need to develop new institutions. Their experience with institution-building is limited by the informal and de facto nature of stigmatized property, so this is particularly challenging. As a community whose history of actively claiming rights to resources or services is very limited, San Felipe does not have experience asserting rights of any kind. However, through an examination of the institutions in San Felipe, it is clear that San Felipe is in the process of negotiating a new position with the state. Judging from the bureaucrats' attitudes toward San Felipe, these efforts have yet to produce the desired results, but through deliberate formalization, the *concheros* have begun to leverage the tools of the state to gain some benefits, and have done so in a framework that remains consistent with San Felipe's identity and social organization.

Many Ecuadorian fishing villages have fishermen's associations responsible for representing fishermen's interests. San Felipe's fishermen's association, the *Concha Prieta*, has the same legal status as the other fishermen's associations. Until 2006, the Association was the only formal institution in the community and not only served its needs regarding fishing and *concha* harvesting, but also acted as the sole official representative body. Although it is ostensibly devoted to managing fishing and *concha* collecting, its role is better understood as mediating the interests of the *concheros* and outsiders. As the shrimp farms moved in after 1987, the *concheros* lost access to the mangroves and were ignored in the closed-door negotiations between shrimp farmers and government, in part because at that time they had no formal organization to represent them. The subsequent development of the *Concha Prieta* was a strategic move to legitimize the community's claim to the resources that had been taken away from San Felipe and enter into a lopsided bureaucratic dialogue. In fact, the first project the Association worked on was a mangrove reforestation project on an island near the village. San Felipe's attempts to reforest the island can be seen as an attempt to stake a resource claim.

The Association formed in 1992, five years after shrimp farms began to develop in the Caráquez estuary.¹¹ Why did it take the community so long to build the Association? As a stigmatized resource, for San Felipe the management of the mangroves and *conchas* has always been determined by the *concheros*' low status in the eyes of outsiders, not their own social institutions. Unlike common property resources, which require active maintenance of boundaries and institutional organization on the part of the community for proper management, boundaries in stigmatized property require no maintenance on the part of the user group. San Felipe retained sole use of the resource, not by efforts to manage the mangroves, but rather

¹¹ It would be interesting to know what funding sources, if any, were available to San Felipe for the development of the Concha Prieta Association, and if the availability of these resources impacted the timing and rationale for the formation of the Association. While San Felipe's status as a user of a stigmatized resource contributed to the delay in the formation of the Association, clearly other factors may have played a critical role.

through the development of a CCPC that allowed the *concheros* to use the stigma placed on them by outsiders. With this history of management, it is not surprising that San Felipe was not prepared to defend its de facto rights to the mangroves when the shrimp farms arrived.

The shrimp farms' title deeds and guard towers are far stronger institutions than the social boundaries that allowed the mangrove resources to be managed through stigma. Stigma is clearly an ineffective fragile means of commons management because it is only as strong as the social distinctions that define it. For a stigmatized system of boundary maintenance to function successfully, the threat of social stigmatization must be strong enough to keep outsiders from using the resource, while also containing the community's internal contradictions.¹² Without a history of institution-building and resource defense based on rules and boundaries, the *concheros* have been limited in their efforts to respond to the shrimp industry.

Although San Felipe's efforts to institutionalize have not enhanced its resource access in the face of political near-invisibility and the shrimp farms' constant threat of violence, the development of the Association represented a shift in the *concheros*' relationship to the mangroves. With the establishment of the Association after the loss of 90 percent of their resource base, the *concheros*' management strategy began to shift from a reliance on social stigma to protect their resources to overt attempts to stake claims to the mangroves. Viewing the Association's role in the community in this light can help to explain why the Association endures, even though it is primarily moribund and ineffective as a decision-making resource management organization.

Official community organizations can be generally understood as attempts to negotiate with the state on the state's inflexible terms. After the development of a water system in the village, San Felipe organized a *Junta de Agua* to coordinate the community's claims for a public water supply. In order to make San Felipe's water use legible to the state, the Ministry of Water required each house to install a meter. While it would appear that San Felipe complied with the demands of the state by purchasing meters, the *concheros* also circumvented the state by relying on their own kinship networks. Instead of each house individually purchasing a meter to create a legible and orderly map of water-using nuclear households, only twenty *concheros* bought meters to share with their neighboring kin. As they develop new institutions and negotiate with the state, the *concheros* are drawing on the kin-based network that formed the foundation of their CCPC. While solidarity no longer shapes *concha* collecting, the water project makes it clear that San Felipe continues to reap benefits from its CCPC status.

Managing Stigma: Implications for the Future

Negotiating with the state and defending San Felipe's access to resources is only one purpose the Association serves. Like many social institutions, the *Concha Prieta* Association is

¹² Although it is likely that even for stigmatized property, internal rules regulate the use of the resource, it was not possible to make observations about that process in this case, because so few *conchas* remain. Internal regulations for stigmatized resources are likely to be important more for regulating behavior of users and not, as is the case for common property resources, for setting boundaries. For a thorough orientation to the internal mechanisms for resource control in common property regimes, see Ostrom 1990.

important for both the internal dynamics and external relations of the community. A strictly materialist approach would analyze the *Concha Prieta* Association as a resource management institution, but it is also a venue for ritual practice of the symbols on which mechanical solidarity rests. Rituals are powerful because they are “capable of making improbable, impossible claims” (Myerhoff 1979:86) and provide a symbolic message of continuity, which can provide hope in desperate material conditions. Improbable, impossible claims are exactly what San Felipe needs in order to create a meaningful collective life as the *concheros*’ access to resources declines. The Association, as the icon of CCPC solidarity for San Felipe, offers the *concheros* an essential sense of meaning. As Gualberto, the president of the *Concha Prieta*, reminisced about the Association, he spoke of fabulous parties that were the envy of the entire region. The parties the *Concha Prieta* hosted forced the neighboring villages to recognize that San Felipe was better organized, more generous, and more powerful, despite its stigma. Unfortunately, San Felipe and the *Concha Prieta* have never been the “envy of all,” and the *Concha Prieta* only hosted one party. But the *concheros* regularly employ a narrative of successful parties to evoke San Felipe’s sense of pride as *concheros* and affirm the legitimacy of their community within the larger societal context of stigma. As a symbol, the *Concha Prieta* serves a social purpose within the community, even if it has failed to negotiate with the state or provide material benefits to the community.

This tension between the memory of a glorious past and the reality of a poor community ignored by the rest of the world is constantly present in San Felipe. Individually and collectively, the people of San Felipe go to great lengths to demonstrate their pride as a community of *concheros*. They have taken a dominant narrative of failure and marginalization and recast it as a story of triumph of the weak in the face of powerful opponents. Although these narratives are useful for San Felipe, they are weak constructions. Perhaps the fragile nature of this coping mechanism is best seen in the mangroves themselves. Here, the world the *concheros* are trying to maintain and the reality of the shrimp farms collide sharply.

In all directions, the path to the mangroves is surrounded by shrimp ponds. It is the *concheros*’ path, but the land belongs to the shrimp farmers. It is illegal to trespass on the shrimp farms. Unlike many laws in Ecuador, this is a law that no one transgresses because the penalty is death. In the distance, a tall tower rises high above the flat landscape and watchful eyes aim guns at the *concheros*’ backs. After the long walk along the narrow path through the shrimp ponds, a tiny safe haven appears. Among what used to be mangroves and is now shrimp ponds, this is the one relic of San Felipe’s glory days, and the one place that it still controls. Just as the party hosted by the *Concha Prieta* functions as a symbolic event in the *concheros*’ memories, this boat launch serves as a symbolic place for maintaining San Felipe’s identity as *concheros*. Remembered places have an important role in the formation of identity because they serve as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed peoples (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:11). Although remembered places are envisioned spatially in many societies, this boat launch serves as a historical marker of a better time. Having specific places that serve as unifying symbols of identity can help anchor the *concheros* in the ongoing re-construction of community identity after the quiet violence of their dispossession. In the village one might never guess the residents’ history of collecting *conchas*—only a few people head out each day to the mangroves—but here amongst the canoes and immersed in the shadowy light of the mangroves, San Felipe’s past has been carefully maintained. It is a nostalgic scene—only the plastic milk cartons for bailing that

sit in the bottom of the canoes, and the boats' obvious state of disrepair, serve as reminders that the days of *concha*-collecting are over. The rotting canoes will never again enter the mangroves, but remain as a testimony to what the *concheros* envision their community to be.



Photo 3: Mariana and Aurelio on the path to the mangroves through the shrimp farms.
Photo by Laura Kuhl, May 2006.

Just as *concha* collecting provided a resource base upon which San Felipe developed as a CCPC, new economic opportunities will create new structural forms and subjective experiences of status and stigma. The new economic opportunities, such as shoveling sand or doing seasonal work on the shrimp farms, are currently open only to men. Approximately 10-15 men in San Felipe are employed for 2-3 days every three months to help with the harvest on local shrimp farms. Although infrequent, the wages offered by the shrimp farms are decent. Gender relations in San Felipe are likely to be renegotiated as these opportunities come to play more central roles in the meaning and experience of community. Unfortunately, many of the new resources and opportunities available do not have the same strongly egalitarian social context as *concha* collecting. As the residents of San Felipe shift their social organization and shared meanings to suit the changing resource patterns, they are likely to find that their strategy as an independent CCPC is ineffective now that the village functions as a labor reserve for the shrimp farms. Expressions of community solidarity will change along the lines of these emergent structural

lines, and this will have profound implications for San Felipe's internal dynamics and its external relationships.

Conclusion

Although San Felipe's relationship to *conchas* may be most simply construed as an economic relationship, clearly San Felipe's connection to *conchas* goes much deeper. Personal identities are defined by their status as *concheros*, although few people in San Felipe collect *conchas* any more. Traditional gender and kinship patterns among *concheros* were tailored for clam collecting, and the activity reinforced these roles. This social-ecological dialectic shaped San Felipe's self-identification as the community of clam collectors, as well as its low status in the region. Internal solidarity as a CCPC and external imposition of low social rank combined to create the social-ecological fact of a stigmatized property system. However, as the users of a heavily stigmatized resource, the *concheros* had not developed the community institutions needed to defend their rights to access when new, high-status users, such as shrimp farms, claimed both access and control of the resource. Stigmatized property is a brittle social-ecological system.

With the loss of the mangrove resources, the *concheros* of San Felipe are struggling to re-define themselves and rebuild their community institutions in order to survive dispossession. Their closed corporate status now entails more disadvantages than benefits. With the collapse of the fishery, the social-ecological system of stigmatized property is now maladaptive for San Felipe, and the social structure of the community will need to change to reflect the changing resource patterns and ecological reality. While many factors come together to explain the continuation of San Felipe's closed corporate status and identification as the community of *concheros*, two key factors are the social exclusion faced by the *concheros*, and their own resistance to change. These tensions raise important questions about the advantages and vulnerabilities of stigmatized property and the interaction of power, identity, and social status for resource use and social change.

The concept of stigmatized property provides a useful framework for both analysis and policy. When analyzing the relationships between communities and natural resources, analysts should consider how resource use, social status, and community solidarity are mutually constituted. This requires a processual analysis of social-ecological systems rather than a purely materialist or institutional analysis that focuses on just the resources or rules and roles. It is important to expand our analysis of access to resources to include resources which are not actively managed and consider rights to access which are not actively defended, but do exist. Complex socially-defined systems of resource access and use, such as stigmatized property, are likely to exist elsewhere. Consideration of these relationships to natural resources may help explain social and ecological transformations, particularly in postcolonial societies with hierarchical dominant societies and low-status minority groups. By recognizing that property systems can involve trade-offs between benefits like community solidarity and equality and disadvantages like stigma and invisibility, more sensitive development programs and tenure policies can be developed to address the poverty and dispossession that stigmatized property systems are likely to entail. In addition, with a more nuanced understanding of the nature of access rights, we may be better able to explain and prepare for how communities adapt to

changing resources or threats to their access. By viewing the relationship between communities and resource use holistically and dynamically, we can explore the implications of the loss of resources for individual identities, kinship and gender relations, community solidarity and community organization. Only through such a holistic approach can we begin to do justice to the complexities inherent in relationships to natural resources and develop policies more sensitive to local needs and experiences.

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