

Symbolic Protection? Legal Sufficiency and Enforcement Gaps in Prohibited Marine Species Regulation: A Comparative Study of Sri Lanka and the Maldives

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Sri Lankan law prohibits the capture and trade of several protected marine species, including parrotfish (Scarinae), tomato hind (*Cephalopholis sonnerati*), sharks, and mobulid rays, which are essential for coral reef functioning, trophic balance, and marine ecosystem stability. Although the regulatory framework appears comprehensive, these species continue to be harvested and traded despite existing legal restrictions. This study examines whether such legal protection is substantively effective or largely symbolic. Using a doctrinal and comparative approach, the study analyses Sri Lanka's marine regulatory framework alongside that of the Maldives, a small island jurisdiction with comparable dependence on marine resources but a more integrated fisheries enforcement system. To bridge legal analysis with implementation realities, qualitative survey data from Sri Lankan fisheries stakeholders were incorporated to examine awareness, compliance, and perceptions of enforcement. Findings indicate that the principal challenge lies not in legislative insufficiency but in weak implementation. Limited stakeholder awareness, inconsistent monitoring, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms substantially reduce the practical effectiveness of legal prohibitions. In contrast, the Maldives demonstrates stronger integration between regulatory design, monitoring systems, and enforcement practice, narrowing the gap between legal intent and compliance. The study argues that Sri Lanka's current framework risks becoming a form of "symbolic protection," in which legal measures exist without achieving their intended conservation outcomes. Strengthening community awareness, improving monitoring systems, and enhancing coordination among fisheries, conservation, and enforcement agencies are critical to improving the effectiveness of marine species protection in Sri Lanka.

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