

Global fisheries provide an important source of food, yet most fisheries are thought to be fully or over-fished. That's led to a great deal of discussion recently in the academic literature about how fisheries could be more effectively managed. One suggestion is "co-management" — cooperative regulation undertaken by fishers and managers together. A recent study led by researchers at the University of Washington adds an important broad-scale perspective. The study, [published online in Nature](#) (subscription required, but a description of the work and its implications [is freely available from the university](#)), reviewed 130 co-managed fisheries in 44 countries, seeking to identify the most important elements of successful programs.

The authors admit that the conclusions are necessarily tentative, because the programs studied were not designed to provide controlled experiments comparing one type of policy structure to another. Nonetheless, given the range and number of programs evaluated, they think their findings are reasonably strong. Key conclusions:

. . . [T]he most important co-management conditions necessary for successful management of fisheries are presence of community leaders, strong social cohesion, individual or community quotas, and community-based protected areas. Additional key attributes were enforcement mechanisms, long-term management policies and influence of fishers in local markets.

In other words, both governance systems and fishing communities had to have certain attributes to make co-management work. The most significant local attribute was strong leadership:

Presence of at least one singular individual with entrepreneurial skills, highly motivated, respected as a local leader and making a personal commitment to the co-management implementation process, was essential. Legitimate community leaders, when guided by collective interests and not self-benefits, give resilience to changes in governance, influence users' compliance to regulations and enhance conflict resolutions in quota allocations. Community cohesion founded on norms, trust, communication, and connectedness in networks and groups was also an important global attribute leading to successful fisheries co-management.

That means that it's not just the design of a co-management system that is important, but its implementation in a location with the right social characteristics. In one sense, the finding

that local leadership is critically important might be a signal to slow down a bit in implementing co-management, because it may be difficult for governments to identify locations where the right type of leadership exists, and especially places where such leadership can be expected to be stable over time. On the other hand, there is much government can do to build local capacity, and surely there are ways to do nurture the type of leadership needed.