

The Visibility of Selected Governance: The Daily Governance of the Smilan Moken Ethnic Group Under Protected Areas, Tourism, and Digital Intervention

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Abstract: Marine protected areas are often promoted as institutional solutions that align biodiversity conservation with tourism development and the cultural recognition of Indigenous peoples. Yet, when governance becomes highly visible—through infrastructure, signage, schooling facilities, and identity administration—justice does not necessarily become more achievable in everyday life. This article examines how environmental justice can remain fragile under a dense assemblage of protected-area regulation, tourism economy, and digital mediation in the Moken community located within Mu Ko Surin National Park. Using a qualitative design based on field observation, limited semi-structured interviews, and analysis of governance artifacts, the study develops two analytic concepts: selective governance and layered accessibility. Findings show that institutional presence frequently prioritizes what is measurable, displayable, and administratively legible, while shifting key livelihood costs onto households through travel time, opportunity loss, procedural opacity, and unequal capacities to activate rights. In this context, injustice appears less as outright exclusion and more as the erosion of lived time, the contraction of choice, and the weakening of intergenerational futures. The article concludes by proposing evaluative criteria for protected-area governance that move beyond inclusion metrics toward usability, temporal continuity, and capability-based accessibility.

Keywords: Environmental justice; Marine protected areas; Selective governance; Layered accessibility; Moken; Everyday governance; Tourism economy; Digital mediation; Intergenerational justice

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1. Introduction

Marine protected areas (MPAs) have become a prominent policy instrument for reconciling ecological conservation with economic growth, often through tourism-led development and state-led spatial zoning. Within this policy imagination, Indigenous groups are frequently framed as cultural stewards and partners in sustainability, making MPAs appear compatible with environmental justice goals. Scholarship has therefore

emphasized how MPAs can generate conflict, displacement, and restrictions on livelihood practices, particularly where fishing bans and spatial boundaries are enforced.

However, governance does not always operate through visible confrontation or explicit removal. In some contexts, institutions are clearly present: infrastructure is built, boundaries are signposted, schooling spaces exist, and identity administration is formally established. Paradoxically, everyday life may remain unstable under such “successful” governance landscapes. This article asks why justice can still falter when governance is highly visible and apparently inclusive.

Focusing on the Moken community within Thailand’s protected-area regime in the Andaman Sea, the study examines how tourism cycles, administrative procedures, and digitally mediated attention reshape daily routines and future horizons. It argues that institutional visibility is not equivalent to institutional usability. Instead, governance may become selective, intensively managing what can be shown and counted, while producing layered accessibility in which rights exist formally but remain unevenly actionable. By shifting the analytic lens from “inclusion” to “use conditions,” the paper clarifies how contemporary MPA governance can generate time-based burdens and intergenerational asymmetries without producing open conflict.

2. Conceptual orientation: From institutional presence to everyday usability

Environmental justice is commonly discussed through distributive, procedural, and recognition dimensions. These lenses remain indispensable, yet they can underdiagnose injustice where institutions are formally present but practically difficult to activate. In highly institutionalized MPAs, the relevant question is not only whether communities are recognized or consulted, but whether governance produces stable capabilities for living, learning, healing, and planning across time.

Institutional presence can create an appearance of fairness: built facilities and official programs signal investment; signage implies rule clarity; educational spaces suggest future-oriented inclusion. Yet these signals may conceal a second layer of governance: the cost structure that determines who can actually use institutions. When access requires long travel, forgone income, translation brokerage, or high procedural risk, rights become conditional in practice ^[1]. Under these conditions, injustice is not always a denial of rights but a conversion of rights into costly options.

This paper conceptualizes “visibility” as a political technology. What becomes visible is not merely what exists, but what is prioritized and made legible for external evaluation—tourism management, standardized housing forms, and quantifiable sustainability infrastructure. Visibility thus operates as a governance outcome in itself. The core analytic task, therefore, is to trace how visible governance interacts with daily rhythms and how it reallocates burdens across gender, age, mobility, and institutional literacy ^[2].

3. Analytical framework and methods

3.1. Selective governance

Selective governance refers to a patterned asymmetry in intervention. Rather than being absent, governance concentrates on domains that are administratively legible and publicly displayable—spatial order, infrastructure deployment, and curated forms of education and culture—while leaving other conditions of well-being as privately absorbed costs. Selectivity is not random. It reflects the incentives of protected-area administration and tourism-oriented political economy: what can be shown to funders, visitors, and regulators is more likely to be

maintained than what requires continuous labor, interpersonal care, or long-term staffing ^[3].

In this framework, selectivity is identified by three indicators. First, investments cluster in visible objects (signage, standardized structures, energy equipment) rather than in continuity mechanisms (stable teaching schedules, affordable mobility for care, predictable administrative support). Second, rules are enforceable as everyday boundaries but lack demandable justifications, producing compliance without dialogue. Third, governance success is narrated through “presence metrics” (built facilities, formal programs) while usability outcomes (actual activation of services) remain weakly monitored.

3.2. Layered accessibility

Layered accessibility extends “access” beyond legal entitlement. It treats accessibility as a capability produced through time, money, information, trust, and embodied mobility. In layered systems, the same institution can be simultaneously present and inaccessible: the clinic exists but requires an expensive journey; the schooling space exists but lacks a continuous temporal rhythm ^[4]; legal identification exists but is unevenly renewable or safely usable.

Layered accessibility is recognized through differential use conditions. Individuals with greater mobility, institutional confidence, or brokerage connections can activate services more frequently, while others face steep opportunity costs and heightened uncertainty. The result is a stratified landscape of practical rights in which the boundary between “included” and “excluded” becomes an internal gradient rather than a formal line.

3.3. Research design and evidence strategy

The study adopts a qualitative design that combines three evidence streams: field observation of everyday routines and boundary practices; limited semi-structured interviews focused on use conditions (education continuity, health-seeking constraints ^[5], administrative experiences, livelihood rhythms); and artifact analysis of governance traces such as signage, infrastructure layouts, standardized built forms, and institutional materials. This strategy prioritizes triangulation across practices, objects, and narratives rather than relying on a single textual dataset.

Analytically, the paper does not treat silence, refusal, or topic avoidance as mere data gaps. In high-stakes administrative environments, such interactional limits are themselves governance effects, marking the edges of what can be safely demanded or publicly discussed ^[6]. The approach, therefore, interprets non-disclosure patterns as part of the institutional ecology shaping everyday life.

4. Findings: How visible governance produces everyday constraints

4.1. Materialized visibility and the reordering of space

Governance becomes tangible through a built environment that signals incorporation into protected-area management. Signage and spatial cues define where movement is appropriate, what conduct is expected, and how tourism flows are organized. Yet the practical consequence is not simply restriction; it is a reordering of daily spatial imagination. Residents learn to navigate a landscape where certain zones are “naturally” off-limits, not because fences exist, but because boundaries have been internalized as common sense.

This internalization reduces overt confrontation, but it also narrows the repertoire of legitimate questions. If a rule is “known” without being explainable, procedural justice weakens in a subtle form: compliance becomes routine while justification becomes non-demandable. In such settings, visible markers of order do not necessarily

provide clarity about rule-making, appeal procedures, or channels for renegotiation ^[7]. Spatial governance thus becomes effective while remaining difficult to contest, producing a stabilized inequality of voice.

4.2. Identity administration and the everyday cost of rights

Legal identification is often assumed to be a gateway to rights and services. In a layered accessibility perspective, identification functions differently: it becomes a conditional instrument whose value depends on renewability, safe usability, and the ability to convert formal status into practical outcomes. Where renewal cycles are uncertain, where presenting documents carries perceived risk, or where key services are geographically distant, identification does not eliminate insecurity; it redistributes it ^[8].

Health care access illustrates the conversion of rights into costly choices. Seeking care can entail long travel and lost income, turning illness into a sequence of economic calculations. The consequence is not only delayed treatment but also a normalization of “living with symptoms” as a rational adaptation. Over time, this cost structure can shape how households plan, how they allocate labor, and how they evaluate the future. Even when no explicit denial occurs, the burdens of activation become a form of structural penalty.

4.3. Education as visible space but interrupted time

Educational facilities can exist while educational time remains discontinuous. In such contexts, schooling becomes an intermittently activated project rather than a stable rhythm of daily life ^[9]. The governance logic favors building and maintaining a visible school space—an easily reported sign of inclusion—while the less visible requirements of continuity (consistent staffing, regular schedules, pedagogical progression) remain fragile.

Temporal discontinuity has intergenerational consequences. Without a predictable learning rhythm, children’s skill accumulation becomes uneven, and the horizon of long-term planning weakens. Education, as lived time, is not merely a service; it is a schedule that organizes attention, aspiration, and the sequencing of life stages. When that schedule is repeatedly broken, the intergenerational promise embedded in schooling is diluted. This dilution appears quietly—in stalled progression, irregular attendance patterns, and lowered confidence in future pathways—rather than in immediate protest.

5. Everyday time, tourism cycles, and digital mediation

5.1. Tourism rhythms and intermittent livelihood time

Tourism-driven economies produce pulsed rhythms: intense activity during visitor peaks and prolonged lulls in off-seasons or low-flow periods. Under such conditions, work becomes opportunistic and discontinuous. Production accelerates when demand appears and pauses when demand fades, limiting the capacity to accumulate stable savings or to plan investments in skills and equipment.

This rhythm interacts with protected-area governance, which often favors orderliness and the management of visitor experience. The outcome is an economy that is simultaneously promoted and constrained, generating a livelihood ecology where residents must stay flexible while absorbing volatility. Volatility, in turn, becomes a governance byproduct: institutions may stabilize the tourist landscape while household time remains unstable.

5.2. Informal practices as time management under institutional gaps

Where formal schedules are interrupted—by schooling discontinuity, limited service availability, and market volatility—informal practices can emerge as techniques for managing empty time. These practices should not be

read simply as deviance or cultural residue^[10]. They function as low-threshold mechanisms for structuring social interaction, regulating emotion, and making long waiting periods tolerable.

From a governance perspective, informal practices reveal what visible institutions do not supply: continuous time structures that enable capability accumulation. When daily life lacks predictable institutional rhythms, people develop alternative routines to fill the gaps. Yet these routines can also carry risk, especially when they occupy legal gray zones or attract external stigma. In that sense, informal time management becomes both a coping strategy and a new site of vulnerability.

5.3. Digital mediation and the reallocation of attention

Digital platforms can provide entertainment, information, and social connection, but they also reshape attention economies, especially where formal educational continuity is weak. When structured learning time is absent, platform content can become the most stable and responsive source of stimulation and imitation. This does not imply a simple narrative of “cultural loss.” Rather, it indicates a redistribution of learning infrastructure from institutional schedules to algorithmic feeds.

For intergenerational justice, the concern is not merely content exposure but the weakening of conditions for cumulative capability. Platformized attention favors immediacy, rapid feedback, and short cycles of engagement. If long-form learning and mentorship are repeatedly interrupted, the capacity to imagine and pursue longer futures can erode. This erosion is gradual and difficult to register through conventional justice metrics, yet it shapes what children consider feasible, desirable, and worth investing in.

6. Discussion: Rethinking justice metrics under highly visible governance

The findings suggest that “inclusion” and “visibility” are insufficient proxies for justice in protected-area governance. When institutions are present but costly to activate, the locus of injustice shifts from exclusion to usability. Selective governance explains why visible investments coexist with fragile living conditions: governance concentrates on what is legible to external evaluation while pushing the burdens of continuity—health access, educational rhythm, administrative navigation—into private time and household resources. Layered accessibility clarifies how rights become stratified in practice, producing gradients of capability rather than binary membership.

This reframing has three implications for environmental justice theory. First, distributive justice must account for temporal burdens, not only material allocation. Time spent traveling, waiting, translating, and managing uncertainty is a distributive outcome that can accumulate into chronic disadvantage. Second, procedural justice must be evaluated through demandability: whether reasons, appeal routes, and renegotiation channels are practically usable, not merely formally stated. Third, recognition justice should include recognition of livelihood rhythms and learning temporalities, acknowledging that governance can damage futures without denying identities.

For governance evaluation, the paper proposes shifting from presence-based indicators (facilities built, programs announced) toward usability-based indicators: continuity of service rhythms, affordability of activation, stability of staffing, and the reduction of opportunity costs for essential rights. In MPAs that depend on tourism, additional attention should be given to volatility management—mechanisms that buffer livelihood time and protect the capacity for intergenerational planning. Finally, digital mediation should be treated as part of governance ecology rather than a background variable, because it becomes a substitute infrastructure when

institutional time is discontinuous.

7. Conclusion

This article examined why environmental justice can remain precarious under highly visible protected-area governance in the context of the Moken community within Mu Ko Surin National Park. The study's central argument is that institutional presence does not guarantee institutional usability. Through the concepts of selective governance and layered accessibility, it showed how governance can intensively manage visible and measurable domains while displacing core livelihood costs into household time, mobility burdens, and unequal capacities to activate rights. Under these conditions, injustice tends to appear not as dramatic exclusion but as the slow erosion of lived time, the narrowing of practical choices, and the weakening of intergenerational futures.

The paper contributes to environmental justice scholarship by offering a framework for analyzing governance effects in settings where formal inclusion is already achieved. It proposes that justice assessments should incorporate temporal continuity, demandable procedural clarity, and capability-based accessibility. For practical application, protected-area administrations and partner organizations should prioritize continuity mechanisms—stable educational rhythms, affordable health activation pathways, and transparent, low-risk administrative support—rather than relying on infrastructure visibility as proof of success. Future research can refine measurement strategies for temporal burdens, investigate how platform-mediated attention interacts with interrupted schooling, and develop comparative analyses across MPAs to identify when visible governance becomes usable governance and when it merely reconfigures inequality into quieter forms.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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