MUNJE OCTOPUS CLOSURE

CASE STUDY (2022–2025)



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Executive Summary

The story

Munje's seasonal octopus closure grew from community experience and a 2015 pilot that was followed by larger octopus catches. After renewed community discussions and co-management planning, the Munje Beach Management Unit (BMU) and community members established the current closure in 2023 at Kibuyuni fishing ground, Kwale County. The initiative combines local knowledge, fisheries monitoring, agreed rules and collaboration with government agencies.

What changed

Catch monitoring compared 2022, before the closure, with 2023–2024, after its establishment. Average monthly octopus landings at the closure site rose from 152.6 kg to 436.7 kg, an increase of about 186%. At adjacent comparison sites, average monthly landings increased by about 44%. Octopus catch per fisher per day at the closure site rose from 1.98 kg to 7.74 kg. Four opening harvests generated Kes 574,204 in BMU revenue; the stated sharing mechanism allocated Kes 287,102 to fishers. An eco-credit revolving fund linked affordable loans to participation in conservation activities.

What the evidence shows

Monitoring also recorded changes in fish catches and seagrass, alongside a decline in live coral cover and bleaching observed in 2024. These mixed findings mean it is too early to attribute broad ecological recovery to the closure. Continued monitoring is needed to assess longer-term trends and the closure's contribution.

Lessons for sustaining the closure

Munje's experience shows that rules and legal recognition need to be matched with inclusive, ongoing communication, accountable BMU leadership, adequate funding and equipment for patrols, and cooperation with enforcement agencies. Community members need clear information about how decisions are made and how benefits are shared. Planning for grievances and conflict, and protecting the integrity of patrols, are essential to maintaining trust and compliance.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Seasonal octopus closures bring local knowledge together with fisheries management. Coastal communities in Kenya have traditionally used rotational fishing, temporarily resting areas so stocks can replenish. A six-month pilot closure in Munje in 2015 was followed by larger octopus catches, including larger-sized octopus. This experience helped community members renew efforts to establish a closure. The current Munje closure was agreed by the community in June 2023 and marked with buoys at the Kibuyuni fishing ground.

Munje is in the Msambweni area of Kwale County in southern Kenya comprising of three main villages with a combined population of about 3,500 people. Most residents depend on fishing, with farming, technical work and small businesses providing additional income. The Munje Beach Management Unit (BMU), a local fisheries co-management institution, manages fishing areas in trust for the community. It is one of about 100 coastal BMUs in coastal Kenya and about 27% have a locally managed marine area (LMMA).

2 THE PROBLEM

Munje has experienced declining catches and ecosystem pressures like other parts of the country. Lower catches affect incomes and food security, while some fishers respond by increasing fishing effort or using illegal and unsustainable gear. The BMU also faced governance challenges, including uncertainty among officials about their roles.

3 THE SOLUTION

Octopuses grow quickly and have relatively short life cycles, making them suitable for seasonal closures. Research cited in the case study indicates that catches can improve after three to four months of closure. In Munje, the closure was intended to support longer-term conservation while creating an incentive for community stewardship. Supporting measures included an eco-credit scheme linked to conservation participation, leadership training and mentoring for BMU officials, patrol support, and links to eco-tourism and peer learning.

The establishment process included legal screening, site identification using local knowledge, awareness and consensus-building, fishery profiling, rule-setting, demarcation, and adaptive management, learning and communication as described below.

3.1.1 Screening

The Fisheries Management and Development Act No. 35 of 2016 and subsidiary legislation provide for ecosystem-based fisheries management and BMU co-management areas. Munje BMU did not yet have a co-management plan, so planning began before the closure could be formally established. The current closure was agreed in June 2023, located at the Kibuyuni fishing ground.

3.1.2 Identification of Potential site based on Local Knowledge

By the time the process of co-management planning started, Munje had already decided on the area they needed for closure based on the previous pilot phase where local knowledge was backed by scientific evidence. The site was rich in biodiversity and close to the beach for ease of enforcement and accessibility.

3.1.3 Awareness creation and consensus Building

After the site was identified, discussions involved government representatives, community members and non-governmental organizations. Meetings covered the reasons for the closure, expected benefits and responsibilities. Awareness activities included BMU assemblies, community barazas, door-to-door outreach, focus group discussions and peer-learning visits. Neighboring BMUs were included because fishers share fishing grounds. Engagement continued throughout the process to address questions and build consensus, including with people who initially opposed the proposal.



Munje Community members in discussions of their community closure. Photo: COMRED

3.1.4 Fishery Profiling

The purpose for fishery profiling was to gather more information to support formal establishment and gather baseline data. Information was collected on fishing patterns, socio-economic dynamics and ecological conditions of the proposed site. Fishing patterns information included fishing intensity, fishing methods, current fishing effort and fished seasons while socio-economic information included the total number of fishermen, earnings from octopus, market dynamics of the octopus and complementary livelihoods. Rapid ecological assessment focused on collecting ecological data such as the spatial distribution of octopus, benthic habitat, fish and general ecological health. Profiling confirmed local knowledge perspectives while taking into consideration socio-economic factors.

3.1.5 Constituting closure guidelines and rules

Clear rules are needed to put the closure into practice. Munje's guidelines cover closure dates and duration; opening protocols and allowable gears; species to be harvested; benefit-sharing; eco-tourism; conflict resolution; and patrol strategies. BMU by-laws set graduated penalties for violations. The draft guidelines and by-laws were presented to the BMU assembly for approval.

3.1.6 Site Demarcation

Demarcation makes the closure visible and easier to enforce. Buoys and signs mark its boundaries. A launch event informed fishers and neighboring communities that the closure had begun.



Munje closure demarcation process. Photo:COMRED

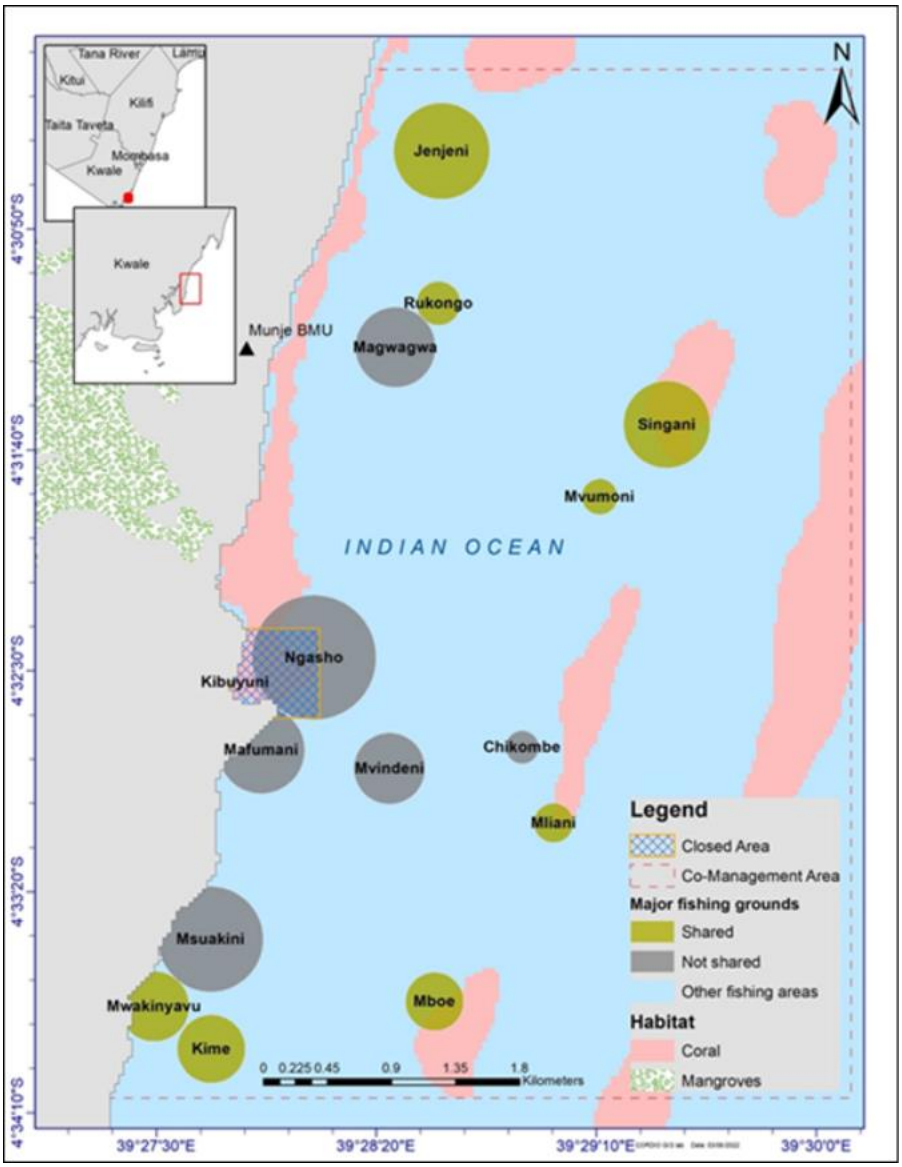


Figure 1. A map of the Munje co-management area showing the closure site and major fishing grounds.

3.1.7 Adaptive Management, Learning and communication

Adaptive management requires a time-bound action plan, sufficient funding, equipment and trained people. With support from COMRED and Blue Ventures, Munje BMU established community patrol and ecological and catch-monitoring teams. Community patrols worked with the Kenya Coast Guard Service, Kenya Wildlife Service and Kenya Fisheries Service. The team used implementation challenges to inform learning and adaptation, while regular communication kept stakeholders updated.



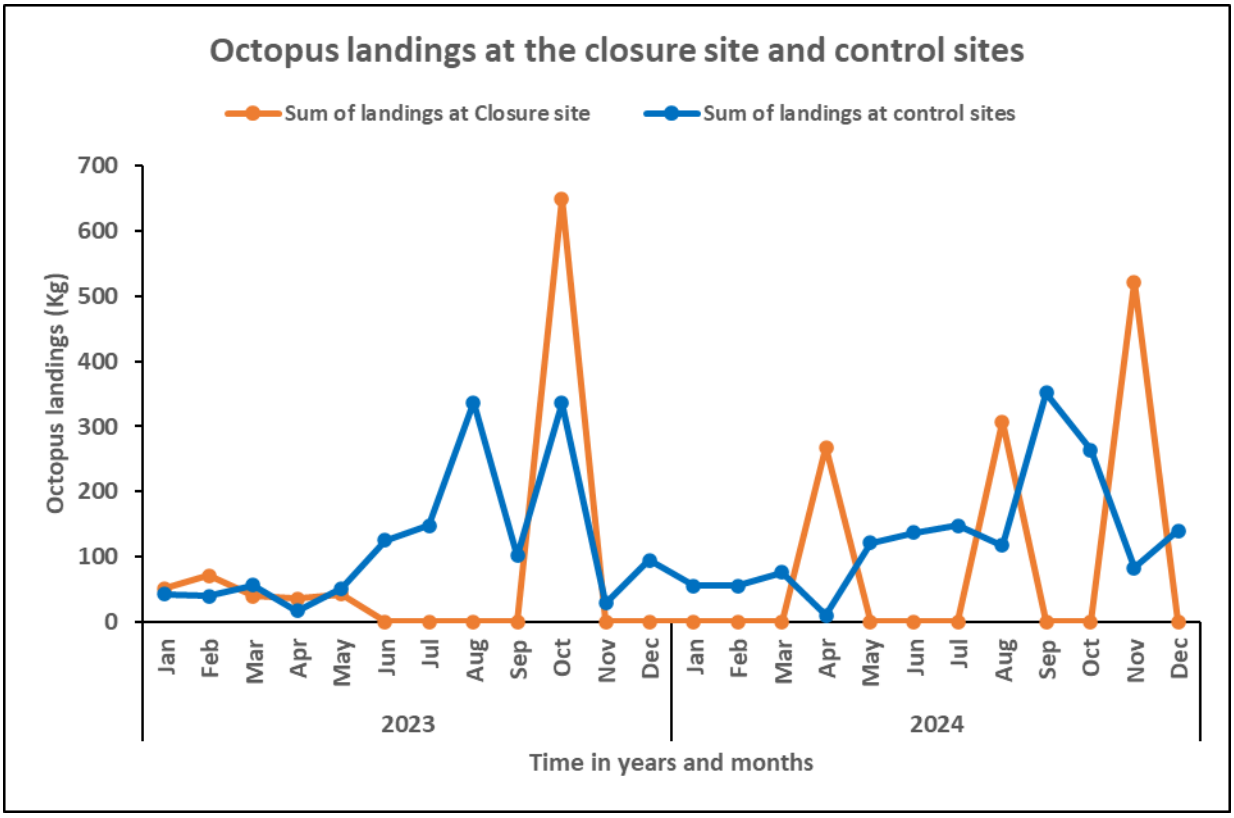
During an ecological monitoring of the Munje closure. Photo: COMRED

4 OUTCOMES

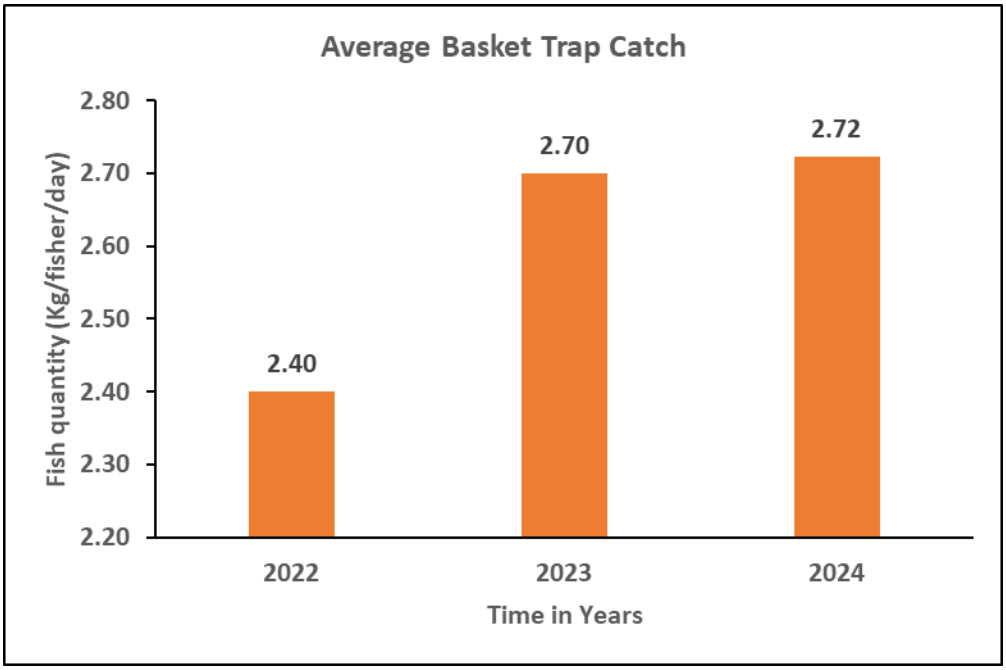
4.1 Improved catches

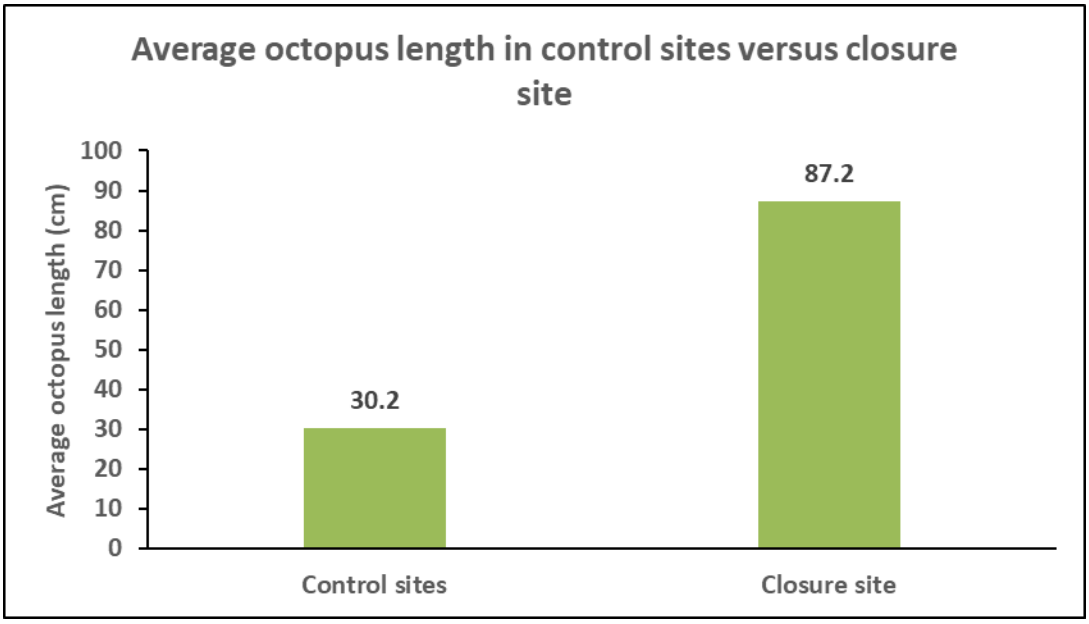
A comparison of 2022 baseline data with 2023–2024 monitoring shows that average monthly octopus landings at the closure site rose from 152.6 kg before the closure to 436.7 kg after its establishment, an increase of 186.2%. At adjacent comparison sites, average monthly landings rose from 84.7 kg to 122.3 kg, an increase of 44.3%. These comparisons are consistent with improved catches at the closure site, although they do not by themselves establish that the closure caused all observed change.

Average monthly fish landings increased from 1,468.0 kg in 2022 to 2,072.2 kg in 2023–2024, a 41.2% increase. These figures include the post-closure period and should be interpreted alongside changes in fishing effort and other conditions.



Octopus catch per fisher per day at the closure site increased from 1.98 kg in 2022 to 7.74 kg in 2023–2024, a reported 290% increase. At comparison sites, it rose from 1.13 kg to 1.88 kg, a 66% increase. Average fish catch per fisher rose from 2.29 kg in 2022 to 2.62 kg in 2024, while the frequency of fishers visiting areas around the closure increased by 27.2%. These trends may indicate greater availability of fish, including a possible adult spillover effect; larval or juvenile spillover was not tested.





4.2 Improved Ecological health

Ecological monitoring provides an early picture of change, but the available comparisons are limited and mixed. The report compares indicator-fish abundance in 2024 and benthic and seagrass cover between May 2023 and December 2024.

The draft reports indicator-fish abundance values of 2,220 ± 183.6 and 2,385 ± 263.1 individuals per hectare, but gives December 2024 for both observations. The survey dates should be checked before

publication. Trophic groups recorded included planktivores, omnivores, piscivores and herbivores. Parrotfish and rabbitfish were among the most abundant herbivores.

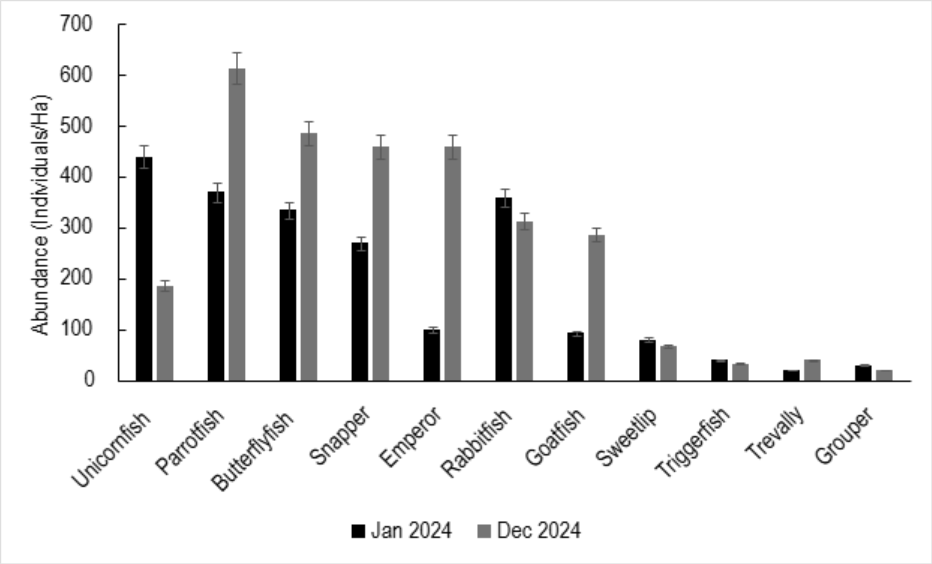


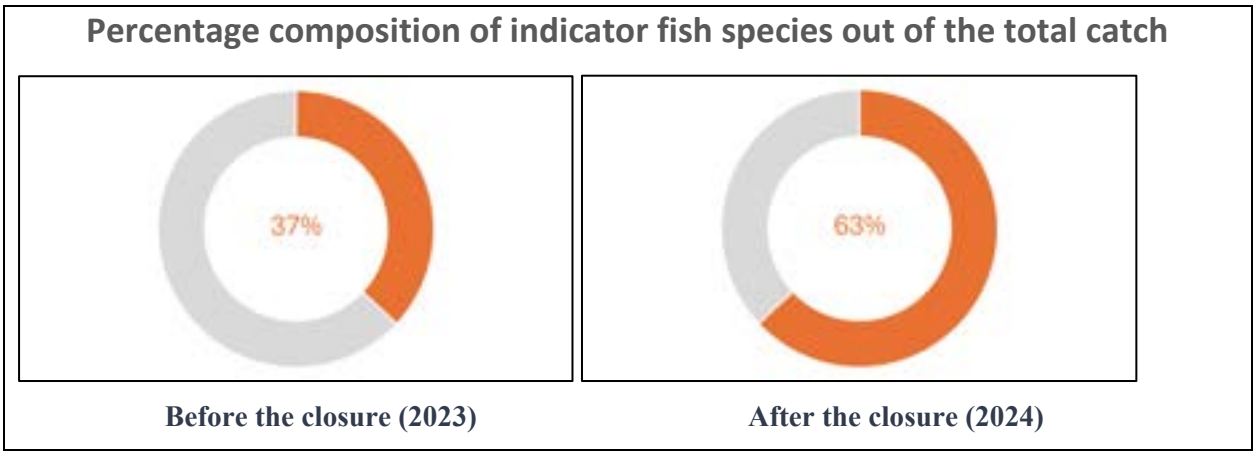
Figure 2. Indicator fish abundance and trophic composition recorded in 2024.

In the closure, Thalassodendron ciliatum and Thalassia hemprichii were the dominant seagrass species. In January 2024, their average cover was reported as 33.3% and 20.2%, respectively. The May 2023 baseline reported 45% cover for T. ciliatum and 14% for T. hemprichii in intertidal areas. The report describes the difference as not significant.

It is too early to attribute ecological recovery to the closure. Fish abundance and seagrass observations provide trends to monitor, while live coral cover declined from 22% in May 2023 to 11.25% in December 2024; bleaching was also recorded in December 2024 and reported by fishers in June. Continued monitoring is needed.

Improved indicator species catch landings

Fish-catch statistics show that the relative composition of indicator species changed between 2023 and 2024. Rabbitfish increased from 24.5% to 47.1% of the reported indicator-species catch. Parrotfish, wrasses and snappers also increased in relative composition, while groupers and trevally declined slightly. These changes are worth tracking, but should not alone be treated as proof of ecosystem recovery.

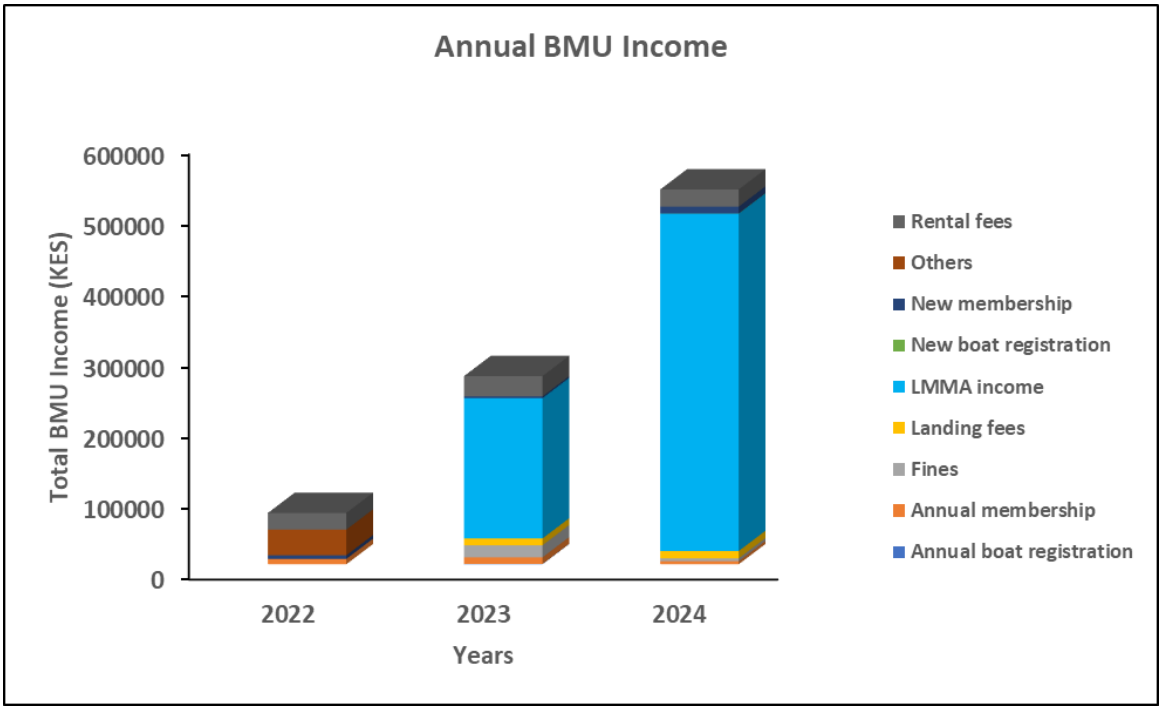


4.3 Increased BMU Revenue and Fisher Incomes

The first recorded opening, in October 2023, yielded 649 kg of octopus and generated KES 198,044 in BMU revenue. In 2024, three further openings yielded 268.115 kg in April, 307.595 kg in August and 521.66 kg in November. Across the four openings, the report records cumulative BMU revenue of KES 574,204, averaging KES 143,551 per opening. Under the reported sharing mechanism, fishers received 50% (KES 287,102).



Women from Munje participate in octopus harvesting during an opening. Photo: COMRED

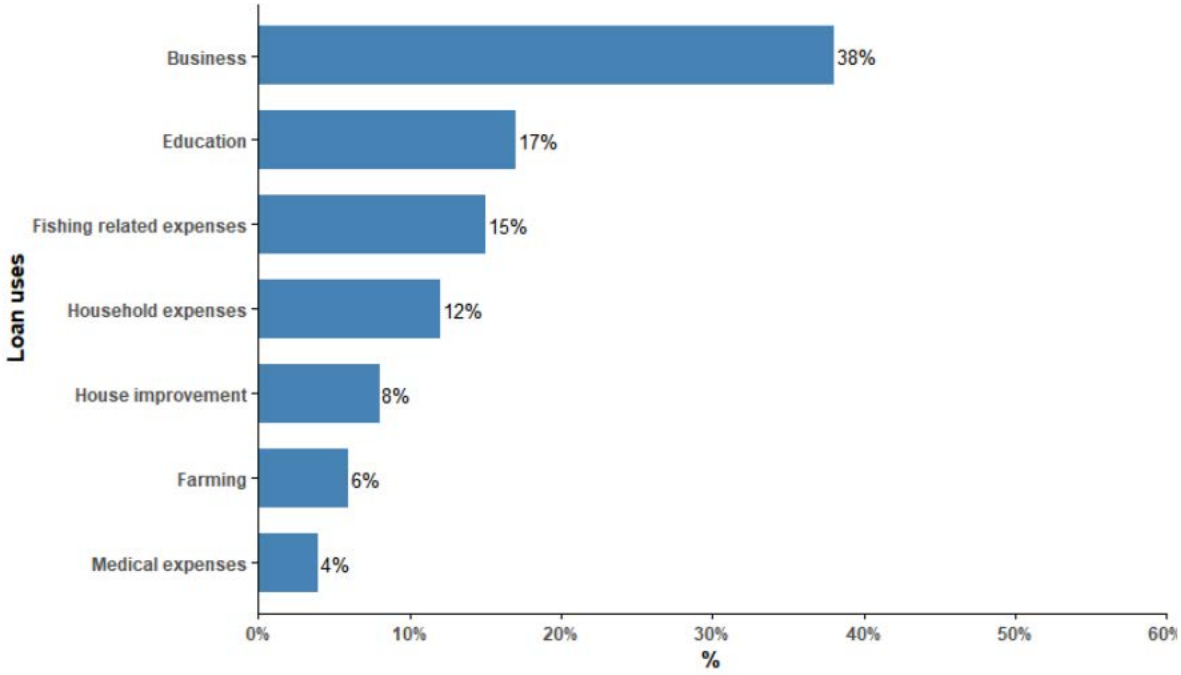


4.4 Financial Inclusion

The Munje LMMA attracted an eco-credit revolving fund for BMU members. The scheme links access to loans with participation in conservation activities. After receiving seed funding, members borrowed to purchase fishing gear, operate small businesses and support farming. The fund is intended to help members manage economic and social shocks.



Munje eco-credit group members during an eco-credit meeting. Photo: COMRED



Between 2022 and 2024, BMU membership increased by 63% and the eco-credit fund grew by 70%, according to the case study.

4.5 Increased compliance

The report records improved registration and reduced use of illegal gear during the closure period. Eight community members joined the BMU, and 94 members (31% of the total membership) renewed within six months. Reported use of monofilament declined from 5.27% in 2023 to 0.72% in 2024. The report associates these changes with awareness activities, training and regular patrols; the patrol boat was also viewed as a deterrent across the fishing grounds.

4.6 Increased BMU Visibility

The closure increased the BMU's visibility through television, newspaper, radio, blog and social-media coverage. BMU members also took part in learning events and hosted visiting teams. Selected published coverage is listed in Annex 1.

4.7 A year without the closure

Between June 2024 and June 2025, conflict escalated until the closure collapsed entirely. Rangers stopped work after dissenting community youth entered the area to fish. Although the incursion attracted negative publicity, it also demonstrated the closure's ecological benefits: fish and octopus were thriving. Alarmed, the BMU took the matter to court, but the case was dismissed because the area had not been gazetted as protected. The ruling raised questions about the legality of closures nationwide. Undeterred, the BMU pursued local solutions, persuading the dissenting youth, who were not BMU members, to join. The youth citing exclusion from direct benefits and lack of integrity as main reasons for invasion. Another measure was establishment of an independent village oversight committee, with government authorities serving as ex officio members. These efforts led to the closure's revival, with uniformed rangers fully deployed to maintain vigilance.



The new Munje patrol team after the revival of the closure in 2026. Photo:COMRED

5 LESSONS LEARNED

The implementation of community-led conservation initiatives, such as octopus closures, has emerged as both an effective and challenging strategy for restoring marine ecosystems while supporting local livelihoods. In Kenya, these efforts are often anchored in co-management frameworks that empower communities to take a lead role in managing their coastal resources. Drawing from the experience of the Munje octopus closure, this document outlines key lessons learned during the inception, planning and implementation phases of the closure. It highlights the critical importance of a supportive legal framework, strong community engagement, clear communication, effective governance, and adequate resource mobilization. The lessons gained from Munje provide valuable guidance for other coastal communities and stakeholders interested in establishing or strengthening locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs). These lessons further offer a roadmap for addressing practical challenges and ensuring long-term sustainability of community conservation initiatives.

5.1 Legal Framework

Enabling legislation and frameworks are important when setting up a closure. This is the first check on the list. Legislation for establishment of conservation areas should exist, if not, the process of amending the law or regulation should start. However, since law enactment or amendment is lengthy, it is easier and convenient if enabling legislation exists. In Kenya, formation of LMMAs is supported by the Fisheries Management and Development Act, 2016 and its subsidiary legislation, the Beach Management Regulations 2024. Although LMMA is not literally mentioned in the legislation, it is implied in form of a Joint Co-management Area (JCMA) or Co-management Area (CMA) where specific closures or 'tengefus' fit as conservation areas.

5.2 Awareness and sensitization

Early and ongoing awareness helps community members understand the closure, correct misinformation and raise concerns. In Munje, meetings, barazas, door-to-door outreach, focus groups and peer learning supported engagement. Awareness should continue throughout implementation, with channels for community feedback.

5.3 Consensus building

Consensus takes time. Engage dissenting voices and maintain dialogue until broad community support is built. In Munje, continued engagement helped some initial opponents become stewards of the closure.

5.4 Communication

Communication should continue after a closure is established so stakeholders receive updates and can provide feedback. Munje relied heavily on BMU assemblies, which did not reach everyone, particularly non-members. Chief's barazas, door-to-door outreach, local media and SMS updates can help ensure information reaches the wider community and reduce misinformation.

5.5 Institutional governance

BMUs are legally established co-management institutions. The assembly is the main decision-making body, while the executive committee manages day-to-day work. Clear roles, transparent decisions and accountability help maintain members' trust. Munje BMU officials received leadership training and mentoring; the source report does not detail the topics covered.

5.6 Oversight and accountability

Oversight should reinforce clear roles, transparent decisions and regular reporting to the BMU assembly. The executive committee and patrol teams need agreed procedures for recording activities, handling complaints and reviewing performance. Leadership mentoring can support these responsibilities, while community feedback provides a check on how the closure is managed.

5.7 Resources

Closures require financial, technical and human resources for meetings, peer-learning visits, baseline studies, buoys, patrols and monitoring. In Munje, community rangers provided daily surveillance. Sustaining patrols requires funding for boats, fuel, equipment, training and compensation for rangers' time. Resource needs should be planned for both establishment and ongoing management.

5.8 Enforcement

Enforcement is shaped by local politics, judicial processes, social relationships, culture and integrity. Munje's experience shows that cooperation among community patrols, BMUs and government agencies is important, while weak or inconsistent follow-through can undermine compliance and trust.

Community rangers patrol the Munje closure, and the BMU patrol committee investigates reported cases under BMU by-laws. Serious cases may be referred to national enforcement agencies and the courts. The case study identifies challenges including political interference, difficulties navigating the justice system, and family ties. Integrity lapses within patrols also damaged community confidence. Training and sensitisation on these matters, clear procedures and accountable oversight can help address these challenges.

Politics influence resource utilisation in Kenya and anywhere else in the world. Political decisions are torn between compliance and popularity to win votes. In most cases, politicians base their arguments on the popular fisheries principle of open access, not knowing that it leads to the tragedy of commons and even adverse when illegalities are involved. On the other hand, communities feel relief when protected by local politicians from facing the law since apparently, compliance is difficult and demanding. In Munje, the incumbent politicians were perceived to protect suspects because they either lacked knowledge of the consequences of illegal and destructive fishing or chose to do so knowingly. In either case, awareness of the political class is needed.

The judicial system comprising the courts, magistrates, lawyers and court staff interprets and applies the law. It is in the courtrooms where the decision on whether someone has broken the law is made and marks the apex for access to justice. However, before this, the suspect must be arrested and arraigned. The process of arresting a suspect in Kenya is complex, often, most incidences are reported as formalities, not because help is needed. Inside the courtroom is another struggle for the unrepresented litigant. Even though the fisheries law is clear, its interpretation is not so largely to the disadvantage of the litigant. Therefore, when the courts fail to deliver justice, community leaders result to their own means.

The culture of protection or "masking'' of one's own was rife in Munje, making it difficult to enforce. The three villages where fishers come from are rather small and family ties are very strong, aside from a feeling of solidarity among community members and fear of reprisals. Whenever under-age (below 18 yrs) violations were involved, parents seemed helpless, protecting their children from arrests and failing to act. Another factor that came into play was the feeling of "shame" associated with someone spending their time in custody or jail. When this happened, community members did whatever possible to stay away from jail as this was seen to shame their families. These factors outweighed the need to arrest offenders, not only freeing them from blame but increasing their confidence and making them commit similar or even larger repeat crimes.

Integrity, a common value appearing in many institutions' policies in Kenya, is a critical value in enforcement without which cracks emerge. Members of Munje BMU were expected to carry themselves with integrity as they performed their daily duties. Octopus closure enforcement team failed to practice integrity and honesty during patrols, something that broke the confidence of the people they held trust with. Lack of integrity can be viewed as one of the root causes for failure of community protected areas.

5.9 Conflict Resolution

Globally, natural resources are dwindling as the demand for natural products, including food, increases. The scramble for the resources has heightened conflicts even at the local level where communities take the centre stage. In Munje, conflicts were mainly associated with poaching, where some fishers took advantage of weaknesses in patrol and fished illegally. Munje BMU has in its By-laws rules that guide on such offences, usually graduated fines. Offenders in default to such fines resulted to conflict with the BMU.

Conflicts can arise during planning and implementation, including disputes linked to poaching and penalties. Although Munje invested in consultation and awareness, conflict risks were not fully anticipated in the implementation plan. Future closures should include conflict analysis, agreed resolution procedures and a grievance redress mechanism, such as a confidential committee, hotline or suggestion channel.

5.10 Benefit sharing and Inclusivity

Fair benefit-sharing supports community stewardship. In Munje, unclear communication about the existing revenue-sharing formula contributed to perceptions that some people were excluded, including youth who were not BMU members. It is important to explain the formula and eligibility clearly and early, and provide a transparent process for questions and grievances.

5.11 Community user rights

Fishing access in Kenya is generally open to licensed fishers, while co-management arrangements provide communities with a role in managing local fishing grounds. Munje's closure gives community members near-exclusive access to harvest during opening periods. Clearer formal recognition of community user rights could strengthen local stewardship and increase compliance.

5.12 Financial Inclusion

Access to suitable, affordable financial services is limited for many community members, including where lenders require collateral. Munje's eco-credit revolving fund links loans to participation in conservation activities such as monitoring, patrols, beach clean-ups and mangrove planting. Members save and borrow without conventional collateral requirements, supporting livelihoods and building social capital.

6 CONCLUSION

The Munje octopus closure demonstrates both the potential and the complexity of community-led fisheries management. Octopus landings and catch per fisher increased after the closure was established, and opening harvests generated BMU revenue shared with fishers. Ecological monitoring shows encouraging observations alongside declining coral cover and bleaching, so longer-term monitoring is needed. Sustaining the initiative depends on enabling legislation, inclusive and continuous engagement, accountable BMU governance, adequate resources, trusted enforcement, fair benefit-sharing and practical ways to resolve conflicts. The experience offers lessons for communities and partners considering locally managed marine areas and other community-based conservation measures.

7 Recommendations

In view of the above lessons, the following is recommended:

7.1 Strengthen Legal Frameworks and win political support

Expedite the development and amendment of legislation to explicitly recognize and support community-managed conservation areas like LMMAs. Clear legal backing will reinforce the authority of community initiatives and ease implementation processes. However, this is not enough without the political will needed to implement legal frameworks.

7.2 Enhance Community Awareness and Sensitization

Implement continuous, structured awareness and sensitization programs to dispel misconceptions, foster community ownership, and ensure sustained support for conservation initiatives. Awareness in form of community meetings before and follow-up meetings are necessary to keep the community informed.

7.3 Foster Inclusive Consensus Building

Prioritize consensus-building processes by engaging dissenting voices and maintaining ongoing dialogue to foster a sense of collective responsibility and stewardship over resources.

7.4 Improved Communication

Diversify and strengthen communication strategies to ensure consistent, transparent, and broad dissemination of information beyond BMU members. Utilize local media, SMS updates, and frequent community gatherings.

7.5 Promote Good Governance within BMUs

Invest in leadership training and capacity-building for BMU officials and members to promote transparency, accountability, and effective governance, with strong emphasis on participatory decision-making.

7.6 Secure Adequate Resources

Mobilize financial, human, and technical resources necessary for the establishment and sustainable management of closures. This includes supporting community patrols, training programs, and procurement of surveillance equipment.

7.7 Strengthen Enforcement Mechanisms

Develop multi-stakeholder enforcement strategies involving BMUs, national agencies, and community leaders. While doing this create a special law enforcement unit for dealing with fisheries crimes, from enforcement to prosecution. Formation of fisheries tribunal, like the one we have for environment. Address systemic weaknesses in law enforcement through targeted reforms and support integrity at all enforcement levels. All these should be backed by political will.

7.8 Build Strong Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Establish clear, community-accepted conflict resolution frameworks within BMU By-laws, and train leaders in mediation skills to address disputes promptly and fairly.

Develop a grievance regress mechanism (GRM) or a committee where community members can raise concerns, complaints, or suggestions. This can be through suggestion boxes, hotline, or trained GRM committees where information is handled discretely and confidentially.

7.9 Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Benefit Sharing

Design and communicate clear, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms to all community members to minimize conflicts and reinforce community commitment to conservation activities.

7.10 Formalize Community User Rights

Secure and formalize exclusive community user rights for closures under national legal frameworks to strengthen local stewardship and ownership of marine resources.

7.11 Expand Financial Inclusion

Replicate and scale up successful community eco-credit schemes, linking access to financial services with active participation in conservation and co-management activities to enhance economic and social resilience. This should come along with inclusion of additional financial services and products, such as banking and insurance for gears, boats, crops, livestock, and small businesses.

8 Annex 1 Selected media coverage

The following published items provide examples of media and partner coverage of the Munje closure:

COMRED: Munje Octopus Closure (12 September 2023)

Mongabay: Kenyan villagers show how to harvest more octopus by fishing less (24 January 2024)

Media for Nature: Munje Octopus Closure Shines Light on Community-led Marine Conservation (9 May 2024)

Media for Nature: Munje's Octopus Closure: A Beacon of Hope and Employment During COVID-19 (7 September 2024)

Eastleigh Voice: Kwale launches Munje Octopus Closure Area to boost marine conservation