

Fish Slips from the Poor Man's Table

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For centuries, the fishermen of small islands and small coastal states operated in ecological harmony with their stocks of fish. The fishermen met their needs for animal protein with equipment and techniques which were adequate to the task, though not always efficient by modern standards.

Today, governments exercise jurisdictional authority over vast surrounding areas of sea—the “Exclusive Economic Zones” (EEZ) extending up to 200 miles from shore. In theory, their interests are thus secure. In reality, the law is ignored. In some regions, foreign fishing fleets of large trawlers and purse seiners simply sail without hindrance right up to the beach of each small fishing village and, unless effective action is taken soon, such small artisanal fishermen face possible extinction.

That, at least, is the harsh conclusion of a recent report, “An Overview of Fisheries in the Commonwealth”, prepared by fisheries expert Robert Hart and commissioned by the Food Production and Rural Development Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat.*

The report warns that fish is becoming a luxury food and getting progressively beyond the purchasing power of the poor. While exporting fish or the licensing of foreign vessels may help countries with their balance of payments problems, it does little to meet the growing need of poor people for animal protein.

It is estimated that some 20 million people in Commonwealth countries are dependent on small-scale fisheries but their problems are shared by a further 130 million people, mainly Third Worlders.

Conflicting Interests

The problem of conflicting interests in the matter of fishing is a complex one and the report provides excellent background information against which the issues may be considered.

Consider a few of the facts:

— After 40 years of rapid expansion, the world catch of traditional species of marine (85%) and freshwater fish (15%) has levelled off at 72 million tonnes (t).

— The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) forecasts that world demand for fish will rise to 110 million t by the year 2000 but the Global 2000 Report to the President of the USA (1981) predicts that the harvest will rise little, if at all, above the present figure.

— FAO estimates total potential at 254 million t.

— In 1979, some 70% of the world catch was used for direct human consumption and 30% for animal feed. Fish contributes about 6% of the world supply of protein and about 24% of animal protein (compared with about 40% for all forms of meat). The annual availability of fish and other marine products

for human consumption is 12.5 kg per person—an increase of almost 2 kg from the early 1960s.

— As world population increases faster than fish production, the availability of fish on a per capita basis is declining.

— Most traditionally acceptable species are now fully exploited and many are overfished.

— In the mid-1960s ten nations accounted for 60% of the world's ocean catch. In the next decade Japan and the USSR increased their combined share to 32%. Thirty of the major fishing countries which are taking 90% of the world catch are likely to increase their catches in the future.

Certainly, there is a growing demand for fish by the North—a demand which can be met only by further encroachment by the richer more technologically advanced nations on the EEZs of developing countries in the South. After all, the developed countries are generally well able to police their own fishing zones. In fact, the EEZs of most developing countries have yet to be defined and measured. Distant water fleets simply move in and scoop up the fish without benefit to the countries concerned. Indeed, the inshore fishermen have little protection from the operations of the increasing numbers of large vessels of their own national fleet.

It is not a question of attempting to exclude foreign fishermen from other



*Copies are obtainable from: Commonwealth Secretariat, Food Production and Rural Development Division, Marlborough House, London SW1, UK.

people's areas but it is surely right that they should operate on a mutually agreed basis with an equitable arrangement for compensation. To bring about a system of fair shares, the smaller island states will have to establish close cooperation between themselves and enlist the active support of multilateral institutions and of the advanced countries, too, in safeguarding their traditional fishing grounds. In the long term, that is the only sensible course for all concerned.

Inappropriate Foreign Aid

As with so many aid programs, much assistance to small fishermen has been off-target. Developing countries, under the influence of western fisheries experts, have tended to invest in modern offshore fishing vessels. Experience has shown this policy to be, in the main, an inappropriate one.

Mechanizing fishing boats in some developing countries at a time when the world catch from traditional sources appears to have stabilized, creates unemployment, increases the cost of fishing operations and decreases the social and economic benefits now derived from the existing traditional inshore fishing operations.

Studies are needed to find the extent to which the mechanization of the catching operations of artisanal fishermen can continue to be increased before costs exceed the benefits. The whole question of appropriate technology in fisheries has not yet been examined. Studies should be undertaken to ascertain the possible impact of present day trends in the mechanization of inshore fisheries.

While capital-intensive projects to process expensive species, such as lobster, shrimps and tuna, have been carried out successfully, such problems as the curing and smoking of fish for shipment inland or development of more efficient wind-powered small boats remain unsolved.

It seems very probable that sails, which have disappeared in many parts of the world, will reappear in increasing numbers.

The emphasis must in future be on the promotion of local self-sufficiency, low-cost technology and rural development.

Government policies must be developed to control operations on the local fishing grounds, the marketing of the fish, the choice of technology and the issue of credit for the benefit of the fishermen. Without radical change in current trends, small fishermen face little prospect other than continued economic servitude and, ultimately, possible extinction.

Loans to Privileged

Finance institutions have an important part to play. Instead of promoting the development of small-scale fisheries, the banks tend to favor lending to those who can build larger and more modern boats and this is often to the disadvantage of the small-scale fishermen.

Aquaculture has been successfully developed in a number of countries which now obtain a high percentage of their total catch from fish farms: outstanding examples include Czechoslovakia 75%, Israel 36% and India 26%.

Estimates of global aquaculture production by the end of the century range as high as 50 million tonnes, almost 80% of the present ocean catch—but a forecast of 20 million tonnes is more realistic.

Protein Needs

Unfortunately, aquaculture is most likely to flourish in those countries with large and affluent city populations. It is unlikely to improve the availability of much-needed protein in poorer countries to any large degree.

Developing countries might well gain more benefit from seeking to diminish the widespread problem of post-harvest losses in fish as well as in land harvests. These losses are due to poor handling and processing practices, to the lack of ice and refrigeration and the practice of dumping what shrimp trawlermen call "trash fish" which is the by-catch of the shrimp fishery.

In countries such as India, Bangladesh and other countries with large shrimp fisheries, successful harvesting of shrimp by-catch could mean that millions of tonnes of fish would be made available for both human and animal consumption.

Regional Cooperation

The key to the problem, suggests the report, lies in regional cooperation.



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It's true that many regional fisheries organizations have been established but they all have a common failing: none has yet had any enforcement authority and their regulations and quotas are frequently violated.

No provision or legal precedent exists for an international police force and in any case the cost of such a force would be high. Collecting and publishing data covering meetings of scientists and managers and the issuing of reports has become the most useful function of some of these regional bodies.

Despite past failures, it seems clear that efforts to strengthen actual regional cooperation should be stepped up, while each state endeavors to develop its own overall national fisheries strategy.

A practical step in that direction would be the setting up of more Community Fisheries Centres (CFCs). Typically, a CFC begins with a fuel supply store, an ice machine, an engine repair shop, a net loft and a marketing section. Such a grass-roots approach will provide a solid foundation for more ambitious schemes at higher levels.

This excellent review by the Commonwealth Secretariat is backed up by numerous appendices giving solid data on such related aspects as technical assistance needs; projects being planned or implemented; license fees and royalties; penalties of illegal fishing; and an international register of complaints.