

Mail Order Technical Assistance:

Can It Work?

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- International Development Research Centre (IDRC), 5990 Iona Drive, UBC, Vancouver BC V6T 1L4, Canada
- Volunteers in Technical Assistance (VITA), 1815 Lynn St., Suite 200, Arlington, VA 22209-2079, USA

Some information was received indirectly from:

- Peace Corps, Information Collection and Exchange, Office of Training and Program Support, 806 Connecticut Avenue N.W., Washington, DC, USA

The letters sent reflected local fisheries concerns in West Sumatra, Indonesia: small pond management and nearshore marine fisheries.

I later mailed a short free-form questionnaire to agencies above asking about their role regarding mail order technical assistance. Four of the agencies responded in some form to the questionnaire. Though it is not desired to compare the replies of the agencies or to rank these replies as to their usefulness, some comparison is unavoidable.

Some, IDRC for example, were clearly not set up to respond to this type of technical assistance and merely supplied names of other agencies or people who could help. ICLARM and Auburn University did not feel that this

type of assistance was their primary role, but nevertheless provided helpful information. There are also other agencies which could have provided the needed assistance. In general, most useful replies had been received within 10 weeks after the questionnaire was mailed but some took as long as six months.

General information supplied was accompanied with selected publications and often names of Indonesian fishery workers who could be contacted. The appropriateness and quantity of the publications varied considerably depending on the type of agency contacted. ICMRD provided 30 publications which range from how-to-do-it manuals to scientific papers. Other agencies provided fewer publications, but which were tailored to the request. All publications were in English, and no reference was made to possible sources of information in other languages. It was later learned, however, that ICLARM and SEAFDEC can respond to requests in languages other than English, and SEAFDEC, in some instances, can supply translations.

In some cases, publications alone will provide the necessary information. But in other cases, a detailed response is required, so most agencies rely on the support of knowledgeable staff to answer requests for technical assistance. VITA, using a different approach, sent the requests to four volunteers with the hope that some or all of these would provide a good match between volunteer expertise and requesters' needs.

The pond management request asked questions regarding the following: improving production of small ponds, use of predator fish, growing chickens over fishponds, possible other fish and pond construction. This is typical of and probably more specific than other such requests.

No responses gave specific information on all the above items. However, a few gave, for example, specific recommendations about the number of chickens per square meter of pond and names of specific predators which could be used to control tilapia reproduction in this area. Two suggested the "male only" technique for raising tilapia, but

On occasions, I receive letters asking for information about catching sardines with tidal traps, making crushed ice or helping fishermen catch more fish. My name is listed with the Volunteers in Technical Assistance (VITA) VITA is a nonprofit agency which uses volunteers to provide information to people in the third world requesting information. There are other agencies, government- and internationally sponsored, which also provide technical information.

Usually, persons requesting such information know only enough about fisheries to know that they need help. They often do not know the structure of the appropriate government agency in their own country, and are unsure of how to contact experts there. They often have little extra funds for mailing requests or buying books, even if appropriate books and pamphlets are available. Can external through-the-mail technical assistance help people in such circumstances? If so, how can this assistance be improved?

While in Indonesia, I investigated the usefulness of through-the-mail technical assistance. Two Indonesian acquaintances who had queries about local marine and freshwater fisheries were asked to write to the following agencies:

- International Center for Aquaculture and Fisheries, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849, USA
- International Center for Marine Resource Development (ICMRD), Main Library, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881, USA
- Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC), Olympia Building, 956 Rama IV Rd., Bangkok 10500, Thailand
- International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM), MC P.O. Box 1501, Makati, Metro Manila, Philippines



neither enclosed information describing how to separate the sexes. Responses sometimes used terminology too technical for an untrained non-English speaker ("retrogressive interbreeding") or suggested techniques unrealistic for the situation ("monitor ponds regularly using oxygen and pH meters"). In general, however, all responses contained some useful information.

In most cases, suggested local fisheries contacts were unrealistic. Often, they were high level officials in distant provinces.

Only ICLARM responded to the request for assistance in marine fisheries. The information was very detailed and useful. Three agencies merely acknowl-

and also operates a "Selective Information Service" (funded in part by the IDRC) which assists these scientists in carrying out literature searches. ICMRD, judging from the publications it sent, utilizes a similar approach as does SEAFDEC, although SEAFDEC tries to respond to requests from semi- and non-technical people as well. Of the agencies contacted, VITA seemed to be the one which is specifically designed to work with requests from non-technical people. The Peace Corps publications also seem to be directed at this level of understanding.

There is probably no other way in which the requesters could have obtained the information from the agencies contacted. This fact alone indicates the value

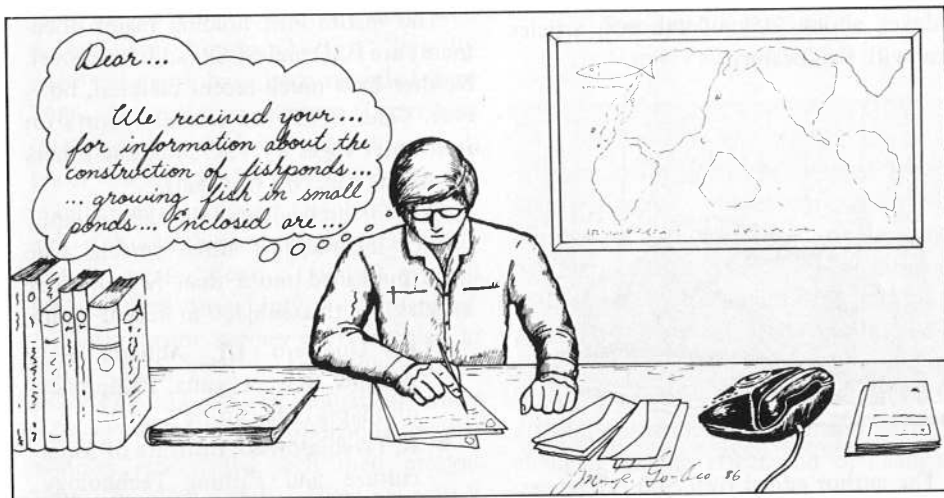
where press runs of tens of thousands of copies would be needed to get information to the field. Currently in Indonesia, reasonably good local language publications about fishpond management are available in book stores, but are not well-distributed. These publications are cheap by western standards (\$1-3) but expensive (a day's wage) for the typical pond owner.

True technical assistance responsive to locally specialized needs would be very difficult to supply from afar. Even organizations such as SEAFDEC and ICLARM which have special expertise in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific cannot be knowledgeable about all the nuances of fishponds or marine fisheries in Sumatran villages. Thus, local support of this type of effort is a logical future direction for such assistance programs.

In Indonesia, for example, there are several voluntary agencies which might be interested in forming cooperative links with the types of agencies mentioned above. The best known of these is probably Yayasan Dian Desa, Jalan Kaliurang Km. 7, P.O. Box 19, Bulaksumur, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. It has worked with various aspects of village development such as fish culture, giant prawn culture and bicycle-operated pond aerators.

Such agencies could act as distribution centers for locally and externally produced and locally translated materials and could arrange other local contacts where appropriate. Appropriate government agencies might also be able to play a cooperative role, although most of these already have access to technical assistance via a multitude of externally funded development projects.

True technical assistance through the mail needs a well-developed extension service. While many countries have this service, they sometimes lack an operating information infrastructure; often the needed information and expertise are available in the countries, but not to those who need them. It may be that external sources can bridge that information gap until an adequate local infrastructure is available. To make externally provided information more useful, it may be necessary to improve contacts with in-country technical assistance agencies. ●



edged the request. Auburn University indicated the request had been forwarded to another agency.

The request on marine fisheries was not particularly unusual but no additional information was received describing fishing methods or small sonar recommendations. It may be that persons working in marine fisheries are not as well tied into this aspect of the technical assistance network as those working in fish culture.

Some of the agencies indicated that they regularly receive requests for assistance but that they are not funded for such purpose. These agencies, in general, felt that such requests hindered the normal work of their staff. Some of the agencies tend to gear themselves toward working with requests from scientists or at least semi-technical persons in the developing world. ICLARM has a special program for working with scientists in the developing countries

of the information. It is possible that the requesters could have gotten some of the information from local fisheries agencies, but this seems unlikely. Although local agencies have some well-trained personnel, the latter are overworked and have few resources for purchasing or producing their own publications, or for visiting field sites. Fishery workers with the most training are generally situated in positions remote from the field and the problems of the everyday fisherman or fish farmer.

The increased use of local personnel and local publications could, if possible, bring needed improvements to the distribution of semi-technical fisheries information. Institutional support of translations of existing publications and support for the writing of new publications in local languages would be a great help. The adequate distribution of good publications is also critical, particularly in large countries like Indonesia