

Empty nets as tide turns on Asia's fishermen

By Jalil Hamid | May 14, 2007

KUALA MUDA, Malaysia (Reuters) - The old adage 'there are plenty more fish in the sea' no longer rings true for Malaysian fisherman Shafie Said.

"These days, we have to go farther offshore and into deeper waters to fish," said Shafie, aged 39, his face weather beaten after 16 years sailing tropical waters in the Andaman Sea, off the coast of northwest Malaysia.

"Sometimes we return empty handed," Shafie said sadly.

It is a story told across Asia by millions of fishermen who ply the region's seas to bring home their main, and often only, source of income.

A staple in Asia with its extensive coastlines and poor populations, seafood provides up to 70 percent of the animal protein intake of most Asians.

But the tide is turning as fish stocks in Asia have declined by 70 percent in the past 25 years, says Stephen Hall, head of WorldFish, a non-profit research body based in northern Malaysia.

"We are taking far too many fishes out of the sea and not leaving enough there to grow and re-generate," Hall said at his seaside office on the Malaysian resort island of Penang.

Compounding the problem is global warming, which will bring rising sea levels, higher sea-surface temperatures, higher salinity and greater weather extremes from droughts to storms.

Scientists predict mean sea levels will rise by 10-90 cm (4-35 inches) over this century, with most estimates in the range of 30-50 cm (12-20 inches).

"This will likely damage or destroy many coastal ecosystems such as mangroves and salt marshes, which are essential to maintaining many wild fish stocks," explained a WorldFish report.

Warming seas are changing fish migration patterns with some fish heading south and others moving north, damaging entire ecosystems and affecting reproduction and replenishment rates.

Scientists in Australia are already warning of a massive decline in fish along the country's eastern seaboard with marine life such as yellow-fin tuna and stinging jellyfish moving towards Antarctica as sea waters warm.

"It's not a disaster for the ones that can move south. It is for the ones that can't move south," Dr Alistair Hobday, the lead author of a recent report from the CSIRO, Australia's premier scientific institution, told Reuters recently.

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Researchers say the implications of the global overfishing crisis are greater for Asia than any other part of the world. Fish is a vital part of food security, employment and income in the region.

But while the number of fish in the sea is dropping dramatically, the demand for fish is rising as populations grow.

The Asian Development Bank has predicted that demand for fish in Asia will continue to rise, reaching 69 million tonnes by 2010 and accounting for 60 per cent of the world demand for fish for human consumption, compared to 53 per cent in 1990.

China with its 1.3 billion population and growing affluence is expanding its fish consumption, especially for expensive reef fish sold live at restaurants.

In the Philippines, a major source of reef fish, 90 percent of fish stocks have been depleted, conservation group WWF said. Divers report seeing lifeless reefs in areas that were once teeming with fish.

Last December, Philippine authorities rescued more than 1,000 endangered humphead wrasse from poachers. The reef fish, which can sell for as much as \$200 per kilo, are adored by diners in China because their large lips

