

Spotlight :Killing the industry by overfishing

By NISHA SABANAYAGAM, AZURA ABAS, NEVILLE SPYKERMAN and ZAINUDDIN MUHAMMAD

29 May, 2007

A case of too many coastal fishermen chasing after too few fish? This appears to be the case in Malaysia where the industry is suffering as a result of overfishing, write NISHA SABANAYAGAM, AZURA ABAS, NEVILLE SPYKERMAN and ZAINUDDIN MUHAMMAD THE numbers are telling where coastal fishing is concerned.

Where just 900,000 tonnes should be harvested by coastal fishermen, they landed 1.4 million tonnes last year.

Fisheries Department director-general Datuk Junaidi Che Ayub is worried that these fishermen may find themselves in trouble in years to come.

He estimates that they will face a drastic drop in income in five to 10 years if nothing is done. He said coastal fishermen should move to deeper waters or enter the aquaculture industry to ease the pressure on such fishing activities.

Junaidi said there had been some measure of success in this respect following the initiation of a plan to attract fishermen to the new sectors.

According to him, marine resources should abound in coastal areas if fishermen did not overfish.

He said there were positive factors like high water temperature allowing fish to breed twice as fast as in temperate waters.

"Yet, despite this, this has led to fishing above the sustainable level in coastal areas and this is worrying," he said.

More than 80 per cent of fish landed in Malaysia come from coastal areas.

Junaidi said the usual indicator of overfishing was an increase in juvenile fish in the catch. He wants to control the number of people in the fishing industry by being strict with the number of licences issued.

On the plus side of the industry, there is much going on in terms of deep-sea activities.

"Deep-sea fishing is still thriving and at a very healthy level."

In Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone, which comprises the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea and the waters around the Layang-Layang and Spratly islands, there is potential to land 800,000 tonnes of fish annually.

But only about 221,300 tonnes are harvested at present, with plans to raise the level to about 500,000 tonnes yearly.

Junaidi also hinted that the department might introduce seasonal fishing to ensure tighter controls.

"Another method is to ensure that not too many trawlers are out fishing by controlling the number of licences we issue."

Too much fish taken out, too little left in the sea

THE supply of fish in the world's oceans is shrinking due to excessive fishing and global warming. Malaysia has not been spared. A 2001 report from the Fisheries Department indicates alarming figures in terms of deep-sea fishing.

Between 1987 and 1998, demersal (deep sea) fish biomass had declined drastically on the west and east coasts of Peninsular Malaysia by 60 per cent and 88 per cent respectively, and in Sarawak by 14 per cent. Biomass reduction in Sabah was 44 per cent.

In 2004, a working paper by various local and foreign experts on the fishing industry revealed that fishing in the Straits of Malacca was under threat. It also stated that the catch rates of commercial vessels had suffered major declines in all areas except a small area of deep water in the northern Malaysian portion of the straits. Fishing in the straits accounts for 45 per cent of all fish caught in Malaysia.

According to WorldFish, a non-profit research body based in Penang, too much fish were taken out of the sea and not enough left to replenish stocks.

WorldFish head Stephen Hall was quoted as saying that fish stocks in Asia had declined by 70 per cent over the past 25 years.

With regard to Malaysia's move to encourage deep sea fishing as part of its plan to drive coastal fisherman to other parts of the ocean, experts say a comprehensive plan of action is vital.

Pollutants and trawlers a threat to local species

A DWINDLING supply of once-common fish species is threatening the livelihood of coastal fishermen here.

Fishermen at Pengkalan Nelayan Sungai Udang, Telok Gong, no longer catch grouper (kerapu) and ikan merah in the quantities they did in the past. They fear that this is a sign of worse things to come.

Tambah Taslim, 57, who has been fishing off the coast of Selat Sungai Langat for more than two decades, said he had not landed the two types of fish even once over the past five years.

"Fishing has never been easy. Netting the kerapu and ikan merah is like getting a bonus and it helps us to make ends meet."

Tambah said fishermen had to be contented with bawal, prawns and crabs, although these were also fast disappearing.

He blamed barges transporting sand, the illegal clearing of mangroves and pollution for the destruction of fishing grounds.

"We also have to compete with fishing trawlers and we are losing the battle," he said.

Tambah said there were also fewer fishermen now as the younger generation looked elsewhere for a better income.

"I, too, have discouraged my son from becoming a fisherman as it's just not worth it."

The youngest fisherman at Pengkalan Nelayan Sungai Udang is 35-year-old Mohd Shahrol Mahmad, who could be among the last of the younger generation to use traditional fishing methods.

"When I first started as a fisherman, there was another young person like me, but today all the 40-odd fishermen here are older than me," Shahrol said.

He said he, too, may hang up his nets for good if the situation does not improve soon.

Income falls from RM30,000 to RM3,600

THERE was a time when the fishermen from Kampung Baru Pulau Rusa, Merchang, Terengganu, were the envy of others in the state.

They earned about RM30,000 a year, which was more than many in other sectors.

Today, they are lucky if they can take home RM3,600 a year.

