

A question of identity

For the first time ever, the Indian State of Tamil Nadu will issue identity cards to women seaweed collectors from the Gulf of Mannar, in recognition of the unique nature of their work

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Women seaweed collectors from the Gulf of Mannar in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu will soon get State-issued identity cards, which they hope will recognize the unique nature of their work. The recognition will also perhaps enable them to access welfare schemes targeting fishers who go to sea. They also hope that the identity cards would ease their troubles with the forest department.

The Gulf of Mannar, a shallow bay off the east coast of India, is a no-take zone (a national park under India's Wildlife Protection Act of 1972). The protected area consists of a 560-sq km area that includes 21 islands. Seaweeds grow abundantly in the shallow waters around the islands and while collection of seaweed is not banned, entry, let alone collection of resources, is banned in and around the islands. The women therefore run the risk of running afoul of the State forest department.

In 2013, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), with support

from the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project, conducted training programmes for the fishing communities of the Gulf of Mannar with a view to developing a community-led management plan for the marine resources of the Gulf, using an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM). BOBLME is a project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), involving the Bay of Bengal countries (India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand), that aims to have a coordinated regional plan for fisheries and environment management. At the training programmes, the women seaweed collectors had intense discussions to zero in on some potential measures they could implement, as well as several issues on which they wished to ask for the State's support. Towards this, a meeting with State government officials was organized under the aegis of the State Planning Commission.

At the meeting on June 11, 2014, fishing community representatives from the Gulf of Mannar had an opportunity to share their current initiatives and ideas for sustainable use of the area's marine resources. The meeting was attended by officials from the forest and fisheries departments, the State Planning Commission, the planning, development and special initiatives department, and researchers.

The women seaweed collectors spoke of how they have restricted their seaweed

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Seaweed collectors in Gulf of Mannar, Tamil Nadu, India. The Government of Tamil Nadu will soon provide identification cards to women seaweed collectors, recognizing this unique group of women fishers

collection to twelve days per month—six days around the new moon period and six days around the full moon time—from an earlier situation of no controls over collection. In 2006, they developed this practice, after discussions with the State forest department and researchers, because they felt the seaweed harvesting was going beyond sustainable limits. The number of collectors had increased and the seaweeds were not getting time to regenerate. The women had also resolved not to use metal scrapers to collect the seaweed as they damaged the coral substrate. Instead, the women switched to using their hands to collect the seaweed. However, to protect their fingers from the sharp corals, they tied rags around them. In addition, they pointed out, they follow a 45-day ban on seaweed collection; this year (2014), the ban period extended to over two months. The women wanted compensation for this period, noting that the men are compensated. The women also requested the State to organize insurance for them as they too go out to sea.

The women also highlighted the fact that the islands are important to the fishers as a place of refuge during inclement weather and to repair boats when out at sea. The women said they were willing to work with the forest and fisheries departments to conserve resources. They (the fishing community) understand the need for conservation measures as they are dependent on the very same resources for their life and livelihood and want, therefore, to ensure that future generations of fishers are not left bereft. The women also refuted the allegation that they destroyed live corals; noting that seaweed grow on dead corals and therefore the women do not go near the live corals. Neither

do the fishing boats break corals as alleged. As one woman asked, if our boat hits corals, the boat would be damaged so why would we deliberately go over corals? Instead, fishers use the deep channels that are free of corals to approach the islands.

During the discussions, the fisheries department noted that it issues identity cards only to fishermen as they go out to sea to fish, and since women focus on post-harvest activities on land, they are not included in this scheme. It argued that welfare schemes are based on families; hence, the women are also covered under the schemes. Responding to the women's demand for compensation for loss of work during the ban period, equivalent to what fishermen were awarded, the department argued that the compensation given to the fishermen was for the family, and not for the fishermen, as individuals. The gender implications of this compensation policy, apparently based on the assumption that men are the traditional head of the family and women are only their dependents, were not, however, discussed.

At the end of the day, it was agreed that the Tamil Nadu State would recognise Gulf of Mannar seaweed collectors as a unique group of women fishers. It would also, for the first time, provide identification cards to women seaweed collectors via the fisheries department. The possibility of providing protective equipment, such as gloves for the women collectors and the use of scissors/cutters to harvest seaweed, would be considered. Finally, it was agreed that the State would also explore the possibility of seaweed collection from deeper waters (6 to 7m), and then provide the women with the required training for diving as well as gear such as oxygen tanks. ■