

Fish as food

Not by fish alone

Alongside the tradition of Japan's fish-eating culture lies the fact that it is the world's largest market for seafood

On the global fisheries scene, Japan's presence is colossal and inescapable. Japan accounts for a third of the worked trade in seafood, importing more than four million tons of fishery-related products from over 120 countries each year.

As a seafood market, Japan is particularly attractive for its prices. On average, the unit price for imported marine products is double that prevailing elsewhere in the world.

While the world's fisheries produced 96,925,900 tons of seafood in 1991, the Japanese consumed 12,202,000 tons. Of this 2,850,000 tons were imported.

As one Japanese observer notes, It is not an exaggeration to say that how we eat fish affects the world's marine ecosystem and also the people who are dependent on them.

Yet such anxieties about managing and restricting the country's fisheries sector to cope with these repercussions are not widespread in Japan. Instead, they are often brushed aside on the ground of Japan's tradition as a fish-eating culture'.

The growth in Japanese fish production had three distinct periods. At the beginning of the century, during the Meiji era, Japan's fish production was 1,570,000 tons. Within one century the production rose fourfold.

The first phase of growth, when motorised boats were introduced, lasted until the end of the Second World War. The production then amounted to four million tons.

The second phase, marked by the advent of distant-water fishing, ended in the mid

1970s. By then production was close to 10 million tons. The third phase of growth saw production exceeding 12 million tons, thanks mainly to the increase in catches of pelagic species like mackerel and pilchard.

Larger boats, bigger gear and greater freezing capacity expanded the domestic market too, bringing into its grip even remote rural areas. Previously discarded whale and tuna meat now came to be sold as 'fish sausages'.

During the 1970s the annual per capita fish consumption was 38.9 kg. By 1989 this had almost doubled to 72.1 kg.

By then Japanese distant-water vessels were already losing their fishing grounds abroad. At one time their contribution to the national fish production was close to a third of the total. As this share declined rapidly, Japan's officials and companies were quick to bemoan the loss.

But there was hardly any discussion on how this might have come about through oversupply to the domestic Japanese market itself or how the market could have changed to help create a 'fish-eating culture'.

Joint ventures

The decline in the production by distant water vessels necessitated greater imports into Japan.

To retain access to fishing grounds, distant-water fishing companies themselves established joint ventures in the coastal countries they operated in.

The Japanese government grants special import quotas to such joint ventures. Some analysts believe that the rapid growth of imports into Japan during the

1970s resulted from this significant shift from national distant-water fisheries to joint venture companies.

With more of pilchard being caught by large-net purse-seiners and round haul nets off-shore, the share of pelagic species in the total catch increased.

In 1975 the catch by these two types of gear was two million tons. This rose to 5.4 million tons by 1986. Of this more than three million tons were of a single species of Japanese pilchard.

Nonetheless, more than a third of the national production of fish (9,268,000 tons in 1991) is not eaten by humans. Over two-thirds of the pilchard caught went to produce fish-meal, which was then used for fertilisers and cattle feed. Non-human consumption of fisheries products rose from a million tons in 1960 to 2.4 million tons in 1974 and 3.9 million tons in 1991.

But now production of pilchard has dropped 20 percent, from 4.5 million tons in 1988 to 3.5 million tons. This has hit fish-meal producing companies. It has also led to more imports of fish-meal.

Today the official fisheries policy in Japan is said to be geared towards encouraging development based on 'resource management'. This is supposed to include in its ambit farming, nurturing, hatcheries, biotechnology and the construction of fish reefs in coastal areas.

Nevertheless, it has had little effect. Japan's coastal environment remains destroyed and unfit for the survival of shellfish, for example. This renders ineffective the hatcheries meant for abalone and other types of shellfish.

Some fisheries analysts predict a global supply shortage of 25 million tons in the next century. This is ironic news for a country which is said to have the world's most productive fishing grounds and the sixth largest exclusive economic zone.

The question clearly is: How will Japan cope with the challenge of increasing production without sacrificing the various needs of the different sectors of its fishers?

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