

Comment

A toast to the coast

Close to a fourth of the world's total marine fish production comes from the artisanal and small-scale sector; and almost the entirety of this catch is taken from the coastal waters. Two-thirds of the total marine fish production comprises stocks which pass the first and most vulnerable stages of their life-cycles in coastal areas. Not surprisingly, therefore, the health of the coastal marine environment is inextricably linked to the livelihood of over 120 million people who are directly or indirectly dependent on this sector.

Normally, negative externalities from fisheries to other sectors are insignificant, but the reverse process—from non-fishing activities to fisheries—is formidable. Although fisheries do not pose any threat to agriculture or industry, the environmental impact of agricultural and industrial activities on fish habitats can often be devastating. Likewise, destructive and non-selective fishing methods and practices can also have a negative impact on fish habitats.

In many low-income food-deficit countries, the fisheries sector is usually the employer of last resort. Hence, the degradation of fish habitats is of even greater concern to fishing communities in these countries. This fact further underscores the critical importance of integrating fisheries into coastal area management.

But problems abound—from the definition of the coastal zone' to the coexistence of various forms of property regimes (private property, state property and common property). These only compound the difficulty in prescribing effective measures for coastal management. The variety of problems and the specificities of the coastal zone accentuate the need for a holistic approach to coastal area management.

However, the attempts so far have been, at best, compartmentalized and are inadequate to tackle the task. Developing, integrating and implementing a common framework for coastal management is still a remote goal. The recent South Asian Workshop on Fisheries and Coastal Area Management, organized by ICSF (see pages 40 and 44) threw up interesting proposals for better management of the coastal zone. The Workshop sought to define the coastal zone by recognizing the complexity, diversity and fragility of coastal ecosystems, and their contribution to sustaining livelihoods. Participants felt that the right to livelihood, based on human and ecological values, should be given priority over the right to earn socially irresponsible profits.

Principles of common property and community ownership, as well as decentralized and participatory regimes, ought to be part of coastal area management. The principle that the "polluter must pay" should be strictly adopted. Environment and social impact analyses ought to be undertaken before projects are sanctioned; and public review processes must be made mandatory. Without some sort of coherence among the relevant legislative measures meant to manage natural resources, precious little will be achieved. Equally vital is the creation of conflict resolution mechanisms. By addressing these issues, the Workshop thus provided "some firm foundation to construct future partnerships and regional linkages for the sustainable use of coastal zones and for promoting the livelihood rights of coastal communities."

In the final analysis, however, coastal zone management is not a problem confined to coastal communities; it reflects the anomalies inherent in the utilization of natural resources. The coastal zone is a sign of what we do to our environment and to our fellow-beings. If, as the Vietnamese say, "the sea begins in the mountains", the status of the coastal zone certainly reveals a sign of what we have done with our resources, both in the coast and in the hinterland.

Unless there are major attempts to change our outlook on resource utilization, and unless there are serious efforts to clearly define our rights and responsibilities in relation to such resource utilization, threats to coastal resources and coastal communities will continue unabated. In such a context, effective management of the coastal zone will remain just a distant dream.

