

About to Disappear

A field trip to Teluk Bahang, a fishing village on the northwestern tip of Penang in Malaysia, shed light on the lives of small-scale fishers

Malaysian fisherwoman Ani Zubaida did not mince words when she spoke about the adverse impact of trawlers on her life: “Trawlers are stealing our fish. They should not be allowed to fish in the territory of small-scale fishers. Else, we will be forced to quit this job.”

What provoked Zubaida was the abysmally low catch she got in February this year. The average daily income of the 52-year-old from Teluk Bahang, a fishing village in Malaysia’s Penang state, fell from Malaysian Ringgit (RM) 200 (about US\$50) to RM 50 (less than US\$15).

The dwindling catch is a result of indiscriminate trawling; Teluk Bahang has a large concentration of small-scale fisherpeople, who have been seriously concerned about the trawlers for a while now. In February, they interacted with journalists, members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), policymakers and researchers from six Asian countries—they had gathered in Penang for a week-long workshop on ‘small-scale fisheries, food security and wholesome nutrition’, organized by the WorldFish in association with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

For the 400-odd small-scale fisherpeople in Teluk Bahang, trawlers are the biggest adversaries because of their unscientific fishing practices. “Trawlers are not supposed to fish between 14.8 km and 28 km from the shore. But they often violate the practice, denying us our livelihood,” complained Zubaida.

Zubaida, one of the two fisherwomen in Teluk Bahang, started fishing at the age of 20 after her marriage with Rahim. “I turned to fishing to support my family,” she said. “Now, my husband does not have

to employ a helper. It helps us save money,” she said.

Of late, the reduction in catch has cut a hole in the family’s revenue. Zubaida and Rahim said they may be forced to quit fishing if the government fails to take action. “What is the point in continuing in this job without getting decent returns for your effort?” she asked. “Only the government can help us now,” she said.

Persatuan Pendidikandan Kebajikan Jaringan Nelayan Pantai Malaysia (JARING), the Malaysian Inshore Fishers’ Association for Education and Welfare, estimates that trawling has caused a 50 per cent drop in fishers’ income in Malaysia.

Besides, said the organization’s chairman, Jamaluddin Mohamad, the trawlers are causing large-scale environmental damage. “The trawl gear traps juvenile fish during their sweeping action. In the process, they destroy mangroves and the marine ecosystem,” he said.

“Juvenile fish should be left to grow in the sea. Trawlers have to catch 92 juvenile fish to make one kg of fish. If the fish is left to grow, each fish may attain an average weight of 12 kg. We are losing huge quantity of marine wealth because of trawlers,” he said. Jamaluddin added that the government should allow trawl gear only in ‘Zone C’ fishing area that lies beyond 28 km from the coast.

Abundant commodity

Fish was an abundant commodity in Teluk Bahang until a few years ago. It was a time when small-scale fishers never ventured too far to get a good catch.

Sixty-five-year-old Nurdin Hussein, one of the oldest fishermen in the village, said his village is experiencing

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A small-scale fisherman in Teluk Bahang on the island of Penang in Malaysia. The dwindling catch – a result of indiscriminate fishing by the trawl boats – has been a major cause of concern for the small-scale fishers in Teluk Bahang

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the adverse effects of trawling now. “The fish came to us when I started fishing 35 years ago. We had to put in little effort then,” reminisced Hussein. “But we have to search for fish now. Fish wealth has dwindled because of trawlers.” The fishers said indiscriminate development activities too have destroyed marine life.

Thirty-six-year-old fisherman Faisal said jellyfish population is on the rise in Teluk Bahang. And he believes it is linked to the extinction of sea turtles. “Turtles eat jellyfish. The number of turtles decreased drastically due to nonavailability of nesting space and this caused an increase in the jellyfish population,” he said.

The Resonance of MuSIC

The capture fisheries of Bangladesh comprise nearly 70,000 fishing boats, offering livelihood to about 3.3 million artisanal fishers. They catch nearly 1.8 million tonnes of fish, which is almost 80 per cent of the total capture fisheries production of the country. Despite such a large contribution, the fishers and their livelihoods have been given scant attention by the authorities concerned, including the national policymakers.

The Multi-Stakeholder Information and Communication (MuSIC) Workshop, jointly organized by the WorldFish Center and FAO in late February 2019 in Penang, Malaysia, gave an opportunity for some Bangladeshi government organisations (GOs), NGOs and communication personnel to share their understanding and views with some of the regional country representatives, including international agency personnel and experts.

The workshop, designed with a high degree of professionalism, could establish a common platform for the respective stakeholders who are expected to act as the forerunners for the betterment of small-scale fisheries in their own country. To this end, WorldFish Bangladesh has organised some formal and informal consultation meetings/discussion sessions on small-scale fisheries, where the participants shared their experiences and took the learning back to their respective countries. Meanwhile, WorldFish Bangladesh has taken the initiative to design a future project that will address issues related to the small-scale fisheries of the country. In this regard, the MuSIC participants are trying to contribute in designing the project with the knowledge and learning.

The MuSIC platform requires further strengthening with the facilitation of the organisers. WorldFish and FAO can organise similar refresher workshops in regional countries with GO/NGO support. 3

– by Masood Siddique,
Natural Resource and Fisheries Expert, CNRS, Bangladesh

Man-made Islands and the Future of Penang's SSF Communities

The Multi-Stakeholder Information and Communication (MuSIC) Workshop was held in Penang, Malaysia, on February 18-23, 2019, with the objective of sharing and learning more about small-scale fisheries (SSF). It was co-hosted by WorldFish and FAO.

The MuSIC Workshop involved journalists, NGO activists and fishery researchers from six countries, namely, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Myanmar, Malaysia and the Philippines.

There are 4,817 licensed fishermen in Penang island and most of them are small-scale fishers. Currently, the main challenge for the SSF community in Penang, apart from decreasing fish catch, is coastal development and reclamation. Starting a few years ago, a few fishing grounds in coastal areas have been reclaimed by the state government for housing, most of it for luxury housing projects that locals cannot afford to participate in.

Affected by these reclamation activities, the SSF community in Penang began losing their fishing grounds. Pollution from reclamation forced fishers to travel far away to fish, increasing their cost of operation. As the amount of catch shrinks, they find it difficult to continue as fishermen. Slowly, Penang island is losing its SSF community.

The Penang state government plans to reclaim 4,500 acres south of Penang island. The proposed Penang South Reclamation (PSR) Project involves the creation of three islands stretching from the south of the Penang International Airport. The main rationale for the PSR is to create land banks to finance the Penang Transport Master Plan (PTMP), another controversial project.

PSR will have a tremendous impact on fisheries. In all, 4,817 fishermen in Penang will be directly affected by the project. Fishing activities are conducted extensively within the proposed PSR area as well as in the surrounding sea. The proposed reclamation project will lead to the total loss of mudflats, hitting the marine food chain and the fishing industry. Loss of coastal habitat due to this proposed project is a major environmental blow.

The mining of marine sand and aggregates used for reclamation and development projects is also increasing, affecting the seabed flora and fauna. Millions of tonnes of sand must be mined, and rocks quarried to create new land.

Dredging and extraction of aggregates from the benthic (sea bottom) zone destroys organisms, habitats and ecosystems—the impact is deep on the composition of biodiversity. This leads to a net decline in faunal biomass and abundance or a shift in species composition, research shows.

The Environmental Impact Assessment report of the PSR states that the wholesale value of fish landed at the study area was an estimated RM42.09 million, which amounted to 12.4 per cent of the total wholesale value of fish landings in Penang Island in 2015. Adding on to the downstream activities, this multimillion-ringgit fisheries sector, on which thousands depend, is being traded off for development. Fish are being wiped out, as will the fishermen as they lose their fishing grounds. Is that the intention of the state government?

Hopefully, the MuSIC workshop will be a starting point for the SSF community in Penang to join together and fight for their future. ♣

— by **Azrilnizam Omar** of Persatuan Pendidikan dan Kebajikan Jaringan Nelayan Pantai Malaysia (JARING), Malaysia

Little wonder, then, that the small-scale fishery has become a less attractive profession for youngsters. Moreover, fisher parents do not encourage their wards to pursue fishing. “I don’t want my children to pursue fishing. Let them get a good government job,” said Rahim.

Statistics reveal that the number of fisherpeople has been dwindling in Teluk Bahang. Of the 7,000 residents, only 10 per cent pursue fishing full time now. “There is apathy among youngsters for fishing,” said Shadier Iman, a State Fisheries Department official.

However, Jamaluddin said the lives of small-scale fisherpeople have improved after they started lobbying. “Our elders didn’t demand anything from the government,” he said. “But things began to change starting from 2008. We began to raise our voice, and the government began to implement welfare schemes for us.”

The small-scale fishers now enjoys fuel subsidy, a monthly allowance of RM 200 and personal accident insurance of RM 50,000.

Trawl ban

That is why Jamaluddin believes that the government will definitely ban trawlers entering into the territory of small-scale fishers. “Small-scale fishers contribute heavily to the gross domestic product of Malaysia. The government cannot ignore our demands. So I hope the government will enforce a ban on trawl fishing by 2020,” he said. ♣

For more

<https://www.worldfishcenter.org/events/worldfish-hq-events-multi-stakeholder-information-and-communication-music-workshop>

WorldFish HQ events: Multi-Stakeholder Information and Communication (MuSIC) Workshop

<https://dc.icsf.net/en/component/dnews/article/detail/13301-World-News--In-.html>

World News: In Focus: Small-scale fisheries in Asia