

# An Unsung Hero

**A technology innovator with a heart of gold and all the time in the world for small-scale fishworkers around the world**

**V**ery few who read this note will know Jeremy Herklots, that tall lanky Englishman we all looked up to—literally and figuratively—for his quiet, dogged and totally unobtrusive contribution to both small-scale fisheries technology and the global small-scale fisheries movement. I had the unique privilege of being his associate on both counts.

In February 1981, at a meeting in Manila, the Philippines, to discuss appropriate technology in fisheries, sponsored jointly by ICLARM (now known as WorldFish) and the

Asian Development Bank, Jeremy, accompanied by the famous naval architect EWH Gifford from the UK, met with William Blase and Rathin Roy of the Bay of Bengal Project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Jeremy was then with ITDG (the erstwhile Intermediate Technology Development Group, now known as Practical Action), the institute set up by EF Schumacher, author of the much-quoted book *Small Is Beautiful*. He was manager of ITDG's Small Boat Design and Construction Unit.

PHILIP HERKLOTS



Jeremy Herklots. His unforgettable contribution was his role in highlighting to the world the hundreds of artefacts of the life and struggles of small-scale fishers

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The quartet's discussion revolved around the possibility of introducing new designs of beach-landing boats in India to replace the *kattumaram*, the artisanal wooden raft widely used in South India for many millennia.

For such a possibility to materialize, they needed to have contact with a credible boatyard with skilled workers and a boat builder with experience of dealing with artisanal fishing craft. Interestingly, each one of them had, in different contexts, heard about the Boat Building Centre (BBC) at Muttom, a fishing village in South India, and about Pierre Gillet, the innovative Belgian boat builder based there.

Jeremy and Gifford contacted Gillet and, on their way back home from Manila, went to Muttom to meet and discuss possibilities for embarking on a joint venture for building a beach-landing fishing craft that would meet the occupational needs and also suit the pockets of the expert artisanal fishers of the area.

of appropriate technology in small-scale fisheries.

I was a keen observer and participant in the making of this revolution. I was closely involved in documenting the pains and pangs of the process of innovation and diffusion of these boats and can vouch for the crucial and pivotal role Jeremy played.

Collaborative technical work, involving a range of variously skilled persons from different countries and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, working within the confines of their own organizational structures, is rarely a smooth affair. Jeremy assumed the role of 'facilitator-in-chief'. With his enormous technical and organizational skills, commonplace resourcefulness, and huge reserves of energy and English wit, he played the critical role of the connector, the resolver of knotty problems, the facilitator of crucial organizational inputs, the hands-on fixer of the multitude of technical and financial coordination aspects, the pacifier of frayed nerves and egos, and much more. Without this rare mix of qualities in Jeremy, the South Indian beach-landing boat innovation and diffusion would not have played out in the successful manner in which it finally did.

Jeremy's next unforgettable contribution was his role in highlighting to the world the hundreds of artefacts of the life and struggles of small-scale fishers.

A meeting in January 1984 in Hong Kong decided to convene an International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters. This conference was to be held in Rome in July 1984, parallel to the FAO/UN World Conference on Fisheries Development and Management. It was planned in this manner to highlight the central role of 'the people' in the fisheries sector and to also free-ride on the presence of the global media at the FAO Conference to get this message across. I was to play a key role in the organization of this event.

To achieve this objective, it was paramount to have something at this event which would be uniquely different from the usual run of conferences featuring just speeches and discussions. Consulting with Pierre Gillet and Jeremy led to the idea of a major crowd-sourced exhibition on the theme 'Life and Struggles of

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The rest, as they say, is history, which cannot be recounted here. Suffice to say that by 1984, within three years of coevolved research and development among fishers, boat-building carpenters, naval architects and designers, an unprecedented outcome resulted. Fishers began to purchase and operate several plywood boats built using a technique called 'stitch and glue' with enthusiasm, in lieu of their traditional and age-honoured *kattumarams*.

Within a decade, by 1995, as many as 2,500 of this new genre of plywood boats were built by BBC, Muttom and the boatyards of the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS). As I write now in 2021, their numbers have increased to well over 100,000 and they have become the most popular village-based, beach-landing fishing craft design, spread all across the surf-beaten coast of the whole of South India. This is a major revolution and an unparalleled example of 'innovation and diffusion'

Fishworkers'. We wrote letters to the fishworker participants, encouraging them to bring samples of their fishing gear and tackle, models of their boats, their work and cultural costumes, posters, photographs, audio-visu-als of their fishing activities and of their songs and poems—anything they could carry to Rome to represent their lives and their work and also their social and political struggles.

I had made a trip to Dakar in Senegal in April 1984 for a preparatory regional conference of West African fishworkers and supporters. The vibrant colours of the work dresses and fishing craft of these fishers, and their readiness to bring to Rome whatever they could carry, gave hope that the exhibition could be held. And if indeed this was a reflection of the sentiment among all the fishworkers around the globe, then the event could be successful.

I returned to India via Rome to handle the logistics—the conference was two months away in July. With the help of the local organizing team in Rome we identified the venue for the conference and the accommodation for the participants. The venue also had a very large break-out hall that could be used for the exhibition.

On July 1, three days before the conference, Jeremy arrived with his wife Rosemary, all enthused and geared up to make arrangements for the exhibition—without a clue about the space requirements. In those days the telephone and telex was the fastest means of communication, but also the most expensive and least accessible. There was no way we could get information from the delegates—already on their way to Rome from the distant towns and villages of 36 countries—about the nature and quantity of material they were carrying for the exhibition. We had no way to plan the number of (rather expensive) display boards and tables.

As the delegates arrived and unpacked their exhibition items, we realised that the response was overwhelming. The fear dawned on us that we had grossly underestimated the space requirements.

Jeremy made a quick trip to the British Council in Rome and used his influence and contacts to get them to agree to lend their large stack of huge display boards—with wheels—and foldable tables for the exhibition. This was the council's contribution to the



1984 Rome conference poster. Consulting with Pierre Gillet and Jeremy led to the idea of a major crowd-sourced exhibition on the theme 'Life and Struggles of Fishworkers'

conference, for which Jeremy wrote a thank you note on his typewriter, getting me to sign.

The exhibition showcased a diversity of artefacts and a vast number of audio-visual shows of the lives of fishworkers around the world. The venue became the great interaction point of the conference, given the sizeable barriers to communication due to the plethora of native languages being spoken.

The exhibition was a huge success and a major venue for numerous encounters between fishworkers and the world press. Jeremy was always at hand, with his quick strides and efficient skills, to fix any issue. No problem was too mundane or complicated for him to handle. Rosemary accompanied him as the unobtrusive organizer and curator.

Over the years, I have become acutely aware of the huge and under-appreciated role that many individuals have played—and continue to play—in making small but vital differences to the lives of fishworkers around the world. It is also important to note that nobody else but those very individuals, could have made those contributions, given their special talents and willingness to share these unconditionally in the unique circumstances.

Jeremy was a perfect example of one such unsung hero. And he lived to see a thousand full moons. 🌕