



Sri Lankan Fishers and Fisheries Today

Photographs: S Jayaraj

Fisheries is one of the drivers of the Sri Lankan Economy (fish provides food and nutrition, jobs and incomes, foreign exchange earnings, tourism revenues). Sri Lankans love their fish. Fisheries images catch your eye in tourist brochures (the beautiful Oru, smiling fishermen, stilt fishermen on the coast, St John's market in Colombo, catches in Negombo), they have also adorned the pages of *Bay of Bengal News* many times during the past 26 years.

A few facts: coastal, offshore and inland fisheries together employ 250 000 active fishers, a population of over a million. Some 285 000 tonnes of marine fish is landed annually, of which 90 percent is consumed locally and 10 percent exported. But Sri Lanka imports an additional 70 000 tons of dried and canned fish annually to meet local demand. Some 610 species of coastal fish, 90 species of oceanic pelagic species, 60 species of sharks and 215 demersal species have been reported in Sri Lanka. For the domestic market, the high-value species are Spanish mackerel, horse mackerel, trevally, tunas and tuna-like species. There is a heavy consumption of shark and of small pelagics such as sardines, herrings, anchovies and Indian mackerel. Prawns, *beche de mer* and shark are important species for export.

There are 12 fishery harbours, several large and small anchorages and as many as 700 village-level landing sites. The total fishing fleet in 2004 consisted of more than 31600 boats – traditional craft (motorized and non-motorized), 6-7m FRP boats, 3 1/2 ton boats, offshore multi-day boats and beach seine craft. Traditional fishing craft (simple canoes with outriggers) make up nearly half



the fleet, in spite of all the development during the past few years. Government schemes for fishermen include low-cost housing, community centres for fishing villages, drinking water supply, bus services to transport fishermen and gear, an accident compensation scheme and a variety of other smaller schemes.

A narrow continental shelf is a major resource-limiting factor in Sri Lanka. Some issues: heavy exploitation of pelagic species and inadequate exploitation of demersal and other species (commercially valuable fish in deeper waters, such as large yellow fin and big eye tuna remain under-exploited); lack of protected landing facilities in some areas; unsatisfactory catch monitoring system and inadequate knowledge of fishery resources. The multi-gear multi-species coastal fisheries — and the use of environmentally harmful fishing gear by groups of fishermen — have triggered many user conflicts between different groups. The offshore fishery is characterized by its heavy reliance on gillnetting and associated post-harvest losses.

“Inadequate fisheries management overrides many of these issues,” says Mr G Piyasena, Director-General, Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. With inadequate numbers in personnel and facilities, Sri Lanka’s MCS (monitoring, control and surveillance) capability is unsatisfactory. So is fishermen’s compliance with management initiatives introduced by the authorities — such as boat registration and licensing.

The December 2004 tsunami was a huge catastrophe. It killed more than 35 000 people in Sri Lanka from coastal communities, affected nearly 80 per cent of active fishers and destroyed or damaged more than 75 per cent of the fishing fleet. A large number of small-scale fishing craft

Right and facing page: Shots before and after fish landing in and around the Beruwala harbour.





and fishing gear were destroyed. Of the 12 fishing harbours, 10 were severely damaged. Public and private utilities such as ice plants, landing ports, markets, and houses of the fishing community were destroyed. Production during Jan-August 2005 was less than 40 percent that during the corresponding period in 2003 and 2004.

But post-tsunami rehabilitation allows opportunities to build back better. Some key areas identified in the post-tsunami reconstruction and development strategy: Improved designs for offshore multi-day boats; technological improvements with onboard fish handling and preservation to minimize economic waste and improve quality of fish landed; strengthening of participatory fisheries management, particularly in coastal fisheries, through better awareness creation and better facilities for resource assessments, boat registration and licensing systems.

“Attitudinal changes are required right across the board to tap the opportunities of post-tsunami reconstruction and meet the challenge of building back better,” says Mr Piyasena.

The BOBP has since 1979 been an active partner of Sri Lanka in marine fisheries development and management. Several ideas and innovations have been introduced, and numerous lessons learned, in the areas of fisheries management, fisheries resources including ornamental fisheries, fishing craft, fishing gear, aquaculture, women’s empowerment, information dissemination (including radio programmes for fisherfolk). Several score seminars, workshops and training courses have helped strengthen know-how and facilitated flow and exchange of ideas. Two of the most recent activities initiated by the BOBP-IGO (workshop on the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, and an art contest on the tsunami among schoolchildren) have been reported elsewhere in the issue.



Top and centre: Typical examples of tsunami damage - a fisher's home and a fishing boat. Bottom: Boats being repaired and restored at a boat building yard.