

Maldives

Photo Essay by S Jayaraj

Focus on larger boats, stronger management

“Maldivian fishers are a lucky lot,” a visitor once said. “They just have to drop a line and they get some fish. No wonder they seem relaxed and cheerful.”

During a recent visit to the Maldives archipelago (1 200 coral islands grouped into 19 widely dispersed atolls), Jayaraj visited a few islands of North Malé atoll on a speedboat. Accompanied by two staff of the Marine Research Centre, Maldives, and BOBP-IGO’s Rajdeep Mukherjee, Jayaraj visited Himmafushi, Thuladhoo, Gaafaru, Gulhi and Guraidhoo islands.

Marine resources are the country’s main natural endowment; there are no inland fisheries in Maldives. Fishing operations take place in off-shore, coastal and reef waters. The economy depends heavily on fishing (tuna is the mainstay; skipjack is the main species, yellowfin is also important) and tourism (Chinese, Japanese and Germans are the most visible). Fisheries accounts for about 11 percent of the GDP, 20 percent of the jobs and 74 percent of the country’s exports. In fact, more than half the catch is exported – mainly to the European Union, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asian countries.

High-value reef fish, mainly grouper, are much in demand among tourists, these are often supplied to tourist resorts by fisher associations. Groupers are also being exported to China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. As tourists and exports go up, grouper stocks dwindle. “We have to spend more time than before to catch the same quantity,” fishers say. Normally solitary fish, groupers tend to gather in “spawning congregations” during full moon, between September and November, and are therefore vulnerable.

Right: Scenic view and sunrise at Malé, Maldives; fish market at Malé. Opposite page: Fishing trips, landing center at Thulusdhoo and reef fish catches at Malé.





The Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Marine Resources (MoFAMR) is promoting a management campaign for grouper, through posters, etc.

The Ministry is concerned about possible over-exploitation of reef fish and of the need for management in general (even baitfish are going down in numbers, tropical aquarium fish, bêche-de-mer and giant clam are also under pressure). It is studying the possibility of co-management and wishes to introduce a system in the Maldives that is practical and effective. But time will be needed for awareness-raising on co-management and for mobilizing the co-operation of all concerned. A stakeholder consultation on the subject was held early this year. A quota system based on monthly average landings is mooted by some. "Daily quotas will be difficult to enforce," some officials say.

Dhonis and masdhonis, in various versions, make up the bulk of the fishing craft. Once a plank-built craft of coconut wood, the dhoni of today is very often an FRP boat. The first 70 ft. FRP masdhoni was built in 1997; MoFAMR decided to introduce and popularize a 85 ft. masdhoni; today wheelhouse-equipped masdhonis of 107 ft are under construction. Larger boats and multi-day fishing have captured the fishers' imagination. An FAO fiberglass expert has prepared a manual on FRP boatbuilding. The government wants a strong focus on craft of sound design and stability, on cost-effectiveness, and proper training for fishers.

The December 2004 tsunami killed more than 80 fishers in the Maldives and caused damage worth \$25 million. Support and technical assistance – mainly for new boats, and housing for fishermen – have been mobilized from the FAO, UNDP, World Bank and IFAD. The government is keen to "build back better," to ensure that everyone is better off than they were before the tsunami.

Right and opposite page: Boat building yard at Gaafaru, boats under construction, plastering in progress by a carpenter, fisher children.



