

Thinadhoo Island, Maldives

Text and Photographs by
Y S Yadava

Maldives is an archipelago of 1 190 low-lying coral islands grouped into 26 atolls. The country has an area less than 300 sq. km and a total coastline of 644 kilometers. Some 200 islands are inhabited. The population of the Maldives (July 2000) was estimated at about 320 000. Only five islands have a population more than 3 000.

Thinadhoo (Gaafu Dhaalu atoll) is one of the most highly populated islands in the southern part of the Maldives, and an economic hub of the area, with an airport close by. Its area: 58.10 ha; Population: 6 376.

A BOBP-IGO-NIOSH mission – Dr George A Conway, Director, Alaska Centre of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, USA, Ms Elizabeth Conway, Research Assistant and Dr Y S Yadava – visited Thinadhoo July 17-19, 2008. Objective: To assess safety-at sea requirements of fishers in the southern islands of the Maldives as well as the accident reporting system in fisheries. Mr Ahmed Rashid, Fisheries Research Officer, accompanied the mission.

Island chief Nasir Ahmed gave the mission a brief tour. They saw the newly-constructed ice plant and the fish market (both being post-tsunami initiatives) and the boatbuilding industry. Boats being built ranged in length from 100 to 120 feet. The mission also visited the Thinadhoo hospital.

At a stakeholder meeting organized in the evening, a large group of local fishers took part and told the mission about their needs and problems. Thinadhoo has some 400 active fishers. The main species caught? “Tuna, tuna and tuna”, said a fisherman. All the fishers engage in pole and line tuna fishing, mainly in the atolls. “Fish stocks seem to

be going down every year,” one fisher grumbled. “We have to travel long distances for bait fishing. Our cost of operations is going up.”

The fishers do not regard fishing as a hazardous occupation. In fact, no major fishing-related accident has been reported in more than two decades (except the March 2004 incident, when a boat carrying 126 passengers capsized, killing 21). One reason could be that the fishers operate only within the atolls and in clear weather – they do not fish when conditions turn rough.

Injuries are sometimes caused by hooks. One fisher even lost an eye. Many fishers have now started wearing helmets to protect faces and eyes. They dive deep to catch tuna bait. (Scuba tanks have replaced the once-popular ‘hookahs’ or surface lines). Sometimes they are victims of decompression sickness. Eye problems are common due to prolonged exposure to bright sunlight.

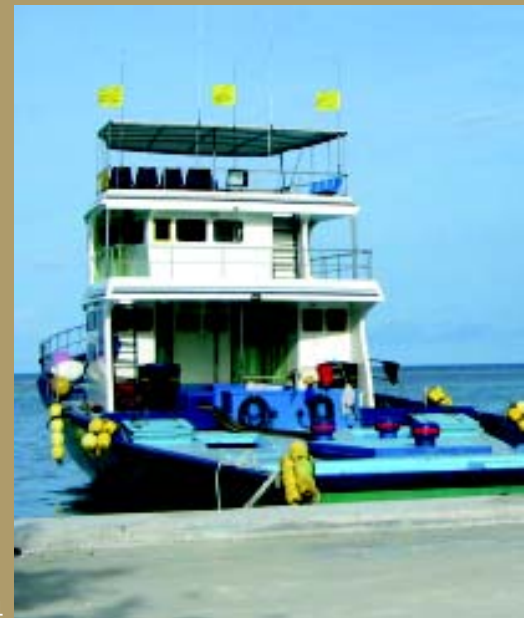
As for safety equipment, the fishers carry satellite phones, GPS and SSB radios, besides life jackets and life belts. They are adroit swimmers and skilled navigators and claim a bit of mechanical aptitude as well – they can attend to minor repairs themselves.

The fishers complained about indiscriminate boatbuilding in the Island – neither any quality control nor inspection. New boats constructed are stretched models of older versions, with no modification in structural design. Recently, a 120 ft fishing boat broke into two – it had been stretched too far. The fishers are not insured, but they plan to go in for insurance.

The photographs on this and the facing page provide glimpses into Thinadhoo Island, and into the lifestyle and work style of the fishers.



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Map of Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll (Thinadhoo Island)



1- Boat construction in progress; 2- The mission with local fishers; 3- The newly constructed fish market; 4- Pole & line fishing vessels lined up at the jetty; 5- Aerial view of Thinadhoo Island.