



Perspective: The WAR on destructive fishing practices

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In a recent international magazine article, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Indonesia's Komodo National Park programme came under fire for its strong enforcement programme, which purportedly clamps down on blast and cyanide fishers in the park without offering alternative livelihoods. While this accusation is clearly misguided (TNC has arguably the most comprehensive and well-managed fisher alternative livelihood programme of any coastal management initiative in Indonesia), it begs the question: Do governments, conservation NGOs and international development aid programmes have an *obligation* to provide alternative livelihoods to fishers who engage in destructive fishing practices (DFP) such as cyanide and blast fishing? After all, these are illegal activities that imperil food security for thousands of villagers in return for the short-term economic improvement of a select few. Moreover, it is been shown to be extremely difficult to provide jobs that are as lucrative as those in the live reef food fish trade.

If one examines enforcement programmes around the world that are fighting other blatantly illegal (but economically enticing) activities that are deemed harmful for the future of society (narcotics peddling, child pornography, and even hired murder come to mind), very few indeed seem to have 'alternative livelihood' programmes attached to them. Psychological counselling, perhaps, but not extensive and expensive efforts to retrain drug sellers to become grocery store owners.

And yet, this perception of deep sympathy for blast and cyanide fishers seems to permeate the thinking of enforcement agencies, the court system, and much of society at large in Southeast Asia. It is maddening to watch judges dismiss court cases of destructive fishers on the grounds that they were 'simply looking for food'. Yes, perhaps, but at the cost of multiple others' (including future generations) right to fish sustainably on healthy reefs? In my experience throughout Indonesia, the average village fisherman takes a rather dim view of this perspective, and would gladly support stronger enforcement efforts against these livelihood-

wrecking activities. Unfortunately, the big businessmen who frequently are behind the 'little guy' bombers and cyaniders know this weakness of the system only too well and adeptly exploit the hesitation to punish DFP perpetrators.

I was recently invited, along with the head of Bunaken National Marine Park, to attend a workshop on illegal logging and endangered wildlife hunting in north Sulawesi's (Indonesia) protected forests, in order to provide a 'marine perspective' on these enforcement issues. After listening patiently to NGOs and government officials complain about the difficulty of finding other jobs for loggers/hunters in order to 'decrease' the prevalence of these illegal activities, Mr Arief Toengkagie (Bunaken's head) spoke up. 'The problem,' he said, 'is that none of you are looking at these illegal activities as something serious enough to prosecute to the fullest. If you want to stop these activities, it's time to declare WAR on them. No more mealy-mouthed talk about "decreasing the prevalence" and "finding economically-viable alternatives"; an all-out war must be declared, with the clear objective of *eradicating* these activities.'

These are, of course, strong words for the normally conflict-avoiding, consensus-building Southeast Asian cultures. But Pak Arief is an Indonesian, and speaks from experience. Beginning in late 2001, Pak Arief and others on the Bunaken National Park Management Advisory Board publicly declared war on blast and cyanide fishing, and set the definitive goal of completely eliminating these activities from the park by the end of 2002 (note that development of alternative livelihoods was NOT an attached prerequisite). While enforcement in the park had been noticeably improving since mid-2000 (in part due to generous grants from WWF-Wallacea to the patrol system), it was this strong and open resolution to end DFP in the park that was the catalyst needed to *really* bring things under control. Within weeks of the declaration, joint patrols consisting of park rangers, water police and trained villagers began systematically confiscating and destroying every live fish cage in

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the park. Villagers throughout the park (there are 30,000 of them!) put the newly-installed VHF village radio system to good use — cyanide and blast fishing incidents were reported immediately to the patrols, who quickly arrested those involved and confiscated compressors, boat engines, and bombs and cyanide.

Bombing in the southern section of the park, previously rampant, was halted completely in a matter of months. Big businessmen behind the live fish cages tried numerous ploys to stop the campaign (including lobbying hard to senior police force members and even the governor for the transfer of the newly-invigorated water police chief), but an active media campaign to 'glorify' the police, rangers and villagers involved in the war seems to have provided job security (at least for now) for these key players. Just as importantly, several judges in the court system have taken note of the declaration of war, and have been actively cooperating in sentencing the perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law.

And what of the average villager in Bunaken National Park? That's always a tough question to answer, but the general impression is that most are very satisfied with the tough stance on DFP. To be sure, there are those complaining loudly (i.e. those with a direct economic stake in DFP), but the fact that villagers from the more remote islands in the park are calling for an expansion of the patrol system to include posts in their area is positive proof that most fishers would prefer to make their own choices on how to use their reef resources rather than have DFP criminals unilaterally deciding to destroy them. Perhaps most interestingly, there have been very few calls for alternative livelihoods. Folks in Bunaken seem to have the attitude that it is a person's own responsibility to choose a legal livelihood. Governments, NGOs and aid programmes should give this perspective serious consideration...



Two responses to:

The live fish trade on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef: Changes to historical fishing practices.

by Mapstone et al., this Bulletin #9 (Dec. 2001): 10–13.

1. Comments by Melita Samoilys¹

The article by Mapstone et al. (2001) was a summary of their extremely detailed and comprehensive study on the commercial line fishery on the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) and the impacts of the live reef food fish trade (LRFFT) on that fishery, which is reported in full in a Cooperative Research Centre Technical Report (Mapstone et al. 2001). This work is part of the broader Effects of Line Fishing Project (ELF) of which I was a part from 1995–1999. There are two main points I would like to make in response to their article. One concerns the viability of a live reef food fish trade, and the other concerns the targeting of spawning aggregations.

Although there have been various statements that the LRFFT is managed well on the GBR and does not have a detrimental effect on fish populations, Mapstone and co-workers provide the first set of

comprehensive data to support this statement. This finding is extremely relevant to the debate on whether the LRFFT is a sustainable fishery. In most parts of the Pacific it is clearly not (see many articles in this Bulletin).

However, on the GBR Mapstone and co-workers show that the LRFFT has actually resulted in decreased catch rates of the target species, coral trout, probably from increased handling time. In addition, fishing for live fish significantly reduces the catch of byproduct. Therefore, if fishers are switching from dead to live product because it is value adding, it is likely to have both economic and ecological benefits for the commercial fishery. These workers point out, the LRFFT may have been responsible for an increase in effort in the fishery, but this reflects poor effort control within the fishery rather than inherent problems with the LRFFT (see Mapstone et al. 1996, 2001; QFMA 1996, 1999 for details on the fishery and its regulations).

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