

# Hope for the Future

**A recent National Dialogue on Fisheries sought to shift the focus of Malaysia's forthcoming national fisheries policy to issues that concern inshore fishers**

**D**uring 28-29 April 2009, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) or Friends of the Earth Malaysia, successfully organized in Penang, a National Dialogue on Fisheries. For the first time, all the relevant stakeholders in the country's fisheries—ranging from government agencies and enforcement bodies to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academicians and fishermen's leaders—gathered under one roof to discuss common issues.

The participants were mainly drawn from fishermen's groups in Langkawi, Kuala Perlis, Kuala Kedah, Penang, Kuala Kurau and Johor. Also in attendance were representatives from government agencies like the Malaysian Marine Enforcement Agency (APMM), the Fisheries Department, the Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA) and the Marine Department, as well as NGOs like Jaringan Kerja untuk Pesisir dan Laut (JARING), the Indonesian NGO network for marine and coastal resources; the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF); Koalisi Rakyat untuk Keadilan Perikanan (KIARA), or the People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice, Indonesia; Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), along with academicians from local universities.

The main objective of the dialogue was to discuss aspects of Malaysian fisheries, identify problems and weaknesses in current policies and practices, and suggest ways for sustainable and effective management of the fisheries sector. The focus was also on advocating strong and sustainable fisheries policies that emphasize the

interdependency of ecosystems and communities.

In his opening remarks to the meeting, S.M. Mohamed Idris, the president of SAM, said the major issue in the country's fisheries is overexploitation, depletion and extinction of resources. Past policy focused on growth and increase of fish landings, while neglecting issues of resource sustainability, environment

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protection and socioeconomic upliftment of the fishing community. Since 2003, the country's annual total fish landings have been exceeding the maximum sustainable yield, which is 900,000 tonnes. As a result, several species of local fishes have disappeared. Moreover, marine life habitats such as mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs, which are sanctuaries for the reproduction and regeneration of marine life such as fish, prawns and crabs, have been destroyed. Much of this is due to the absence of protective measures in the national fisheries policy, Idris added.

## **Modern fisheries practices**

He also stressed the impact of modern fisheries practices that often create conflicts between traditional fishermen and those operating trawlers. SAM is concerned about the extensive use of destructive gear that destroy the

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marine habitats and, consequently, the sources of affordable protein for fishing households. The current fisheries policy encourages deep-sea fishing without prior consideration of its risks, including its potential to decimate fish stocks. Aquaculture is being promoted as a quick-fix solution to maintain a high growth rate in fisheries production, despite its several drawbacks.

Another issue, Idris pointed out, is the management of coastal and ocean spaces, which includes the physical development of coastal areas, and mining, which is a major source of pollution. The absence of a coastal zone management law has only aggravated matters. These gaps in the management, governance and welfare of Malaysia's fishing communities require urgent remedial measures, he said.

The Dialogue was then officially launched by the honorable Dato' Dr. Baharom Jani, Deputy Secretary General, Ministry of Agriculture. He lauded SAM for holding such a meeting to discuss issues in fisheries with respect to the forthcoming national policy that calls for participation from all relevant parties. Moreover, the ministry is looking forward to enhancing the effectiveness of fisheries management. While acknowledging that fish landings have contributed significantly to the

economic growth of the country, Jani said the demand for fishery products continues to rise, leading to mounting expectations on aquaculture and deep-sea fishing to meet national targets and earn export revenues, as mandated in the country's Third National Agriculture Policy. The Agriculture Ministry is also building up the research and development capacity of government agencies to rehabilitate marine habitats and tackle overexploitation of marine resources.

The third session of the Dialogue featured presentations of papers by distinguished persons from diverse backgrounds. The representative from Malaysia's Fisheries Department addressed the key issues in the gaps in policy, and provided answers to questions on marine resource depletion and vessel licensing, among other issues. The Department is aware of the problems faced by the fisheries sector. However, a greater political will is needed for any significant change to happen, especially in terms of a comprehensive and integrated management mechanism. Enforcement agencies are often overburdened with a large enforcement jurisdiction as they have to tackle the smuggling of goods, trafficking of illegitimate immigrants, encroachment into fishing zones, and other illegal fishing activities. The absence of sufficient resources and facilities is another impediment. Being newly established, APMM, the enforcement agency, is devoid of adequate infrastructure.

### Socioeconomic issues

The other important issue that was extensively discussed throughout the Dialogue was the impact of aquaculture and deep-sea fishing on the marine ecosystem and traditional fishermen. Welfare and socioeconomic issues, including those related to licensing and diesel subsidies, were hotly debated. As a national policy, aquaculture is being seen as an alternative that will offset the depletion of fisheries resources while sustaining high yields from the sector. Yet, the large and ever-increasing presence of aquaculture industries in Malaysia is causing massive destruction of

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Norsalila Aris (SAM), Mohamad Shahrul Anuar (Moderator), Choo Poh Sze (WorldFish Centre) and Jamaluddin Mohamad (JARING) at the meeting

## Memorandum

The following Memorandum was submitted to Malaysia's Minister of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry by the Malaysian Inshore Fishermen Action Network (JARING), the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) or Friends of the Earth Malaysia.

The fishery industry in Malaysia is a very fast-growing one. Unfortunately, apart from advancing the growth of the industry, many of the fisheries and fishermen's issues and problems have not been tackled seriously or effectively.

The situation has raised concerns among the inshore fishermen. Hence, the Malaysian Inshore Fishermen Action Network (JARING), the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) or Friends of the Earth Malaysia take this issue seriously and feel obliged to raise these concerns and bring them to the attention of the Minister of Agriculture in the hope that the issue could be well resolved collaboratively.

JARING, PIFWA and SAM have outlined a few related issues that need serious attention. Among the principal issues and problems are:

Malaysia's national fisheries policy is seen to be neglecting the development and welfare of the country's inshore fishermen as its focus is more on two sectors, namely, deep-sea fishing and aquaculture, which are believed to be able to ensure that the targets of annual national fish production are met.

The expansion of aquaculture industry through high-impact aquaculture industrial zones (ZIA HIP) not only involves high costs but their effects to the environment, society and economy, especially to mangrove forests and coastal ecosystems, are also negative, and tend to increase the income gaps among inshore fishermen, thus threatening their livelihoods.

Trawl nets, and *pukat boya* or *pukat apollo* (pair-trawl net) have major negative impacts on the seabed and marine environment. Their operations have also spelt disaster for inshore fishermen. Zones were introduced to prevent conflicts between the inshore fishermen and the deep-sea fishermen. The laws, however, have not been able to resolve the issue as the deep-sea fishermen continue to encroach into Zone A, which is reserved for inshore/traditional fishermen. JARING, PIFWA and

SAM demand a total ban on this type of fishing using trawl nets and *pukat boya* or *pukat apollo*.

Destructive fishing practices and gear, which affect the ocean ecosystem, continue to exist due to the absence of specific laws against them and also due to poor enforcement of existing laws. Amongst the nets proposed to be banned or whose use should be regulated are *jaring tagan kurau*, *pukat siput retak seribu* (carpet clam nets), *pukat kisa* (boat-seine), *pukat cekam* (barrier nets), and *pukat rawa sorong* (push-nets). These fishing gear destroy the small fish and shrimps as well as the seabed.

The freeing up of licences for vessels was something long awaited by the inshore fishermen. However, there should be proper management and transparency in the process. One issue of concern is that the Fisheries Department has approved and issued licences to non-traditional fishers or recreational fishers. Moreover, the traditional fishermen, who come from a background of poor education, find it difficult to cope with the tedious licensing procedures and conditions put up by the Fisheries Department. As a result, the fishermen have lost trust in the Fisheries Department. They would rather risk going out to the sea without licences, although fully aware of the peril of being detained by the authorities for doing so.

There is need to improve the integrity of the management and enforcement authorities, who now face widespread distrust among the fishermen and the public on account of corruption and inefficiency.

Improvement in fish marketing is needed, through initiatives and incentives to encourage direct selling by fishermen via local fishery co-operatives, transparently managed by the fishermen themselves. The Ministry of Agriculture should try to reduce the functioning of middlemen in fish marketing.

Immediate actions should be taken by the Ministry to arrest the depletion of fisheries resources through an appropriate conservation policy that will seek to regenerate areas like mangrove forests, seagrass beds and marine parks.

Specifically with regard to the cockle fishery, permits should be given to local fishers and the community to harvest the cockles rather than collecting toll fees from private individuals and companies to harvest the cockles.

mangroves and coastal habitats. Official statistics show that the mangrove area in peninsular Malaysia has declined by 65 per cent between 1973 and 2004 due to development activities, including aquaculture. Seagrass beds are now found in only 81 areas, totalling 295.5 ha. Aquaculture is being promoted mainly to generate export revenues and not for local consumption needs, even

though its negative impacts are on local ecosystems.

The rampant issue of licences to fishermen, both deep-sea and traditional, has led to overexploitation of resources, destruction of marine habitats and breeding grounds, and conflicts. However, the more important matter is the lack of transparency in the issuance of these licences, and mismanagement, since bona fide

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A *sampan*, a traditional fishing boat in Malaysia, used by inshore fishermen operating in Zone A (up to five nautical miles). Malaysia's national fisheries policy is up for review

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fishermen claim that many of the licences go to non-fishers.

At the Dialogue there were also calls to ban trawling operations, which have historically been shown to repeatedly encroach into the inshore zone. Malaysia should follow the models of its neighbouring countries, namely, Indonesia and the Philippines, and some regions in Thailand, which have moved to ban such destructive fishing gear. There is a need for environment-friendly fishing technology to replace destructive gear. Priority should be given to traditional fishermen who are the ones who have long been practising environment-friendly methods of fishing.

The Dialogue was equally vociferous on the need to reconsider the development of the aquaculture industry through high-impact aquaculture industrial zones (ZIA HIP), and make proper assessment of the impacts on fishing communities, marine resources, mangroves and inshore ecosystems. Forest Department statistics reveal that between 1980 and 1995, almost 9,000 ha of mangrove forests have been cleared for shrimp ponds. Mangrove areas should no

longer be converted into zones for aquaculture activities, it was stressed.

Several participants said that the Fisheries Department should issue licences in a transparent manner through open and widespread dissemination of information, especially on the bona fides of applicants, thus ensuring that only genuine fishermen are entitled for permits and assistance.

The Dialogue ended with great hope for change and betterment of the lives and livelihoods of Malaysia's fishing communities. 3

#### For more



[www.fao.org/fishery/countrysector/FI-CP\\_MY/en](http://www.fao.org/fishery/countrysector/FI-CP_MY/en)

**Fishery and Aquaculture Country Profiles: Malaysia**

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