



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

**FAO In Action**  
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

*Toward a sustainable catch*



© FAO – Choudhury

**INDIA**

**Tamil Nadu, India** – All along India’s eastern coast a storm is brewing. Traditional fishers are increasingly coming into conflict with the crews of mechanized trawlers that ply the waters of the Bay of Bengal and further down the coastline into the Indian Ocean.

By international standards the trawlers are not large, but the small traditional boats appear minnow-like operating in the wake of the larger vessels. Mechanized trawlers are of relatively recent origin, first appearing in the 1970s and 1980s, but can now be found operating along the entire coastline of India, resulting in much smaller catches for the traditional fishers.

In Tamil Nadu’s Pudukottai district, the clash between trawlers and traditional boat operators came to a head in 1978, leading to something called the ‘three-four’ agreement. The trawler captains agreed to fish three days a week, while the smaller traditional vessels would fish the other four days. Even so, the latter’s catches continued to shrink.

The trawlers use push nets that literally scrape the sea bottom. The nets catch not only juvenile fish but a whole range of life forms found on the seabed, including seaweed. Even the smaller traditional boats have used mini-trawls. The practice is destroying precious fish breeding habitat, which is reflected in the diminishing size of everyone’s catch.

More recently, traditional fishers from Pudukottai’s 32 fishing villages have decided to stop using the trawling method altogether. It’s not been an easy decision as it affects their livelihoods in the short term.

• Karmegan, 47, a traditional fisher for over 30 years, speaks passionately against the use of push nets. “This (push net) is harmful. It takes away the young fish. Over 20 species of fish have already disappeared,” he says. “It scrapes the bottom of the sea where fish lay their eggs. Now we don’t get lobsters here anymore.”

• Chinniaiyah, 52, is another community leader who also heads the Pudukottai district fishers union. “We have to safeguard the sea for the next generation. But we also have to earn our livelihood,” Chinniaiyah says, pointing out the push nets become entangled with crab nets and destroying them. He wants the authorities to provide compensation for the losses.

**FAO and partners work with fishing communities to restore the marine habitat**

• FAO work with partners and local fishers in a co-management process through its Fisheries Management for Sustainable Livelihoods or FIMSUL project, an initiative of world bank. Since implementation, more traditional fishers have agreed to the idea of short-term pain in order to save the local marine ecosystem for the longer term gain of a recovered fishery.

• However, while many of the traditional smaller operators have agreed to the changes, the larger trawler owners are opposed to a ban on push nets, pointing to the large investments they have made.

*“We have to safeguard the sea for the next generation. But we also have to earn our livelihood,” – Chinniaiyah, head of the Pudukottai district fishers union*

A decision on whether to impose a more sweeping ban now rests with the fisheries department.

### Fewer lobsters in the pot

A few hundred kilometers further south, in India's southernmost district of Kanyakumari on the western coast facing the Arabian Sea, the problem is the same – species depletion. Lobsters, once found in abundance here, were overexploited because of a lucrative export market, fetching as much as US\$ 25 per kilogram. From an annual average of 150 tons the catch has dropped to a mere ten tons. "What I got in one day, I get in a whole year now," says an older fisher who uses traps to catch lobsters that live among the rocks. He blames the trawlers. Berried lobsters, holding as many as a 100 000 eggs each, are being caught by trawlers on their way to the deep sea for spawning.

Here too the FIMSUL team has been hard at work. Small traditional fishers in this part of the country have also agreed, in principle, to return endangered berried lobsters and juvenile lobsters back to the sea, thanks partly to persuasions from local religious leaders who formed part of FIMSUL's outreach team. They have also agreed to increase the net size from 90 mm to around 110 mm so that juvenile lobsters can escape.

The decision to return berried lobsters to the sea has not been easy as they weigh more, fetching good money. For implementing partner Kanyakumari District Fishers Sangam Federation (KDFSF), networking with 48 fishing villages across the district, convincing them was not easy.

In the end, the ten member district co-management council (comprising fishers, scientists, NGOs and officers of the fisheries department) has sent its recommendations to district authorities asking them to enforce a ban.

Rubert Jyothi, Assistant Director of Fisheries in Nagercoil, who was closely associated with FIMSUL's co-management process, confidently predicts that the authorities will eventually issue bans to let the local marine eco-system recover. And if the lobsters and other marine creatures get a new lease of life it will eventually mean better livelihoods for the local fishers.



© FAO – Choudhury

*"FAO has been working with partners and local fishers in a co-management process. More traditional fishers have agreed to the idea of short-term pain in order to save the local marine ecosystem for the longer term gain of a recovered fishery"*

## ACHIEVING FAO'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Increasing the resilience of livelihoods to disasters and enabling inclusive and efficient agricultural and food systems are two of FAO's strategic objectives in achieving a food-secure world.

### Contacts

#### Allan Dow

Regional Communication Officer (Asia-Pacific)  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)  
Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific  
39 Phra Atit Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand  
Tel: +662 697 4126 Mobile: +6681 899 7354  
Email: [allan.dow@fao.org](mailto:allan.dow@fao.org) Website: [www.fao.org/asiapacific](http://www.fao.org/asiapacific)