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'Politics playing important role in marine fisheries governance'

Politics, rather than science, is playing an important role in marine fisheries governance, especially in South Asian countries, according to a Dutch scientist.

Maarten Bavinck, a Dutch scientist specialising in capture fishery of India and Sri Lanka, said the dispute between India and Sri Lanka over fishing activities in the Palk Bay still remained unsolved, mainly due to political reasons.

Delivering a lecture on 'Tropical Marine Fisheries Governance: The Way Forward' at the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute today, he opined that Tamil Nadu government should take action to reduce the size of fleets used for fishing in the Palk Bay to resolve the conflict in the region. The lecture was organised by the Marine Biological Association of India (MBAI).

"Trawling needs to be contained in the Palk Bay, where trawling operations across the international boundary line have not only been causing social and economic hardship for 25,000 small-scale fishers and their families in Northern Sri Lanka, but high-level political tensions between India and Sri Lanka", he was quoted as saying a CMFRI release here.

Bavinck, however, said that science-based guidelines are needed to ease the tension in the region. For this, India's CMFRI and Sri Lanka's National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency (NARA) should take joint studies and a coordinated approach towards finding a science based solution, he said.

"In India, fisheries governance has a political dimension. Norms and priorities are not being established by science, but is being debated in the public domain", he said adding that unwanted political influence in fisheries should be contained.

He also said solid ecological and marine biological studies are required to estimate what damage was occurring to the rich resources in the Palk Bay due to intensive trawling, and to restructure the fisheries to maximise benefits of these resource.

"In our research project, we have advocated the possibility of introducing a buy-back programme which would work only if government is able to prevent the 'leakage' of new trawl fishing effort into the Bay," he said.

The scientist said while trawling has helped boost India's catch and export revenue, it has also proven to be the bane of the fisheries, destroying valuable marine habitat and causing decades of intense conflict with small-scale fishers on the inshore and fishing grounds. Bavinck said co-management was the need of the hour to preserve the potential resources in the country.

India should link up the science-based governance with user-based governance to preserve the fishery resources in the Indian waters, he added.