

Community based local management of fisheries - A paradigm from Minicoy, Lakshadweep, India

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ABSTRACT

Traditional practices related to fishing observed by the fishermen of Minicoy, Lakshadweep with a view to conserve the resource and avoid conflicts among them are detailed here.

Key word's : Minicoy, Pole and line, Traditional practices.

Introduction

Fishing is as old as mankind and many coastal communities worldwide have systems of taboos, access rights and traditional practices which effectively protect the status quo. They also play an important role in reducing conflicts, engendering a sense of stewardship in the users of the resource and in maintaining some control on effort or destructive fishing practices (Caddy and Cochrane, 2001). There is also a growing awareness that managing fisheries is more to do with managing the people involved in fisheries than it is with managing the resource. In Minicoy Island, Lakshadweep, also, there is a definite system of traditional practices, which has an effective control on the fishing activities there. Minicoy has been the only place in India where an organized pole and line fishery for tuna especially skipjack using live bait is in vogue since time immemorial though this method has been later transferred to other islands of Lakshadweep. The social set up and way of life in Minicoy are entirely different from those in other groups of island. Here the people are more related to the people of Maldives and as in Maldives, the language of Minicoy is also Mahl. The residential area is in one part of the island and is divided into differ-

ent villages (10 nos). Each village has a village house with a village head. The head is locally known as 'moopan'. All important meetings or important functions of the respective villages are held in the village house. The villagers are bound to follow the decision taken by the village heads or 'moopans'. In government meetings or any other official functions, the 'moopans' are invited as representatives of the respective villages. Thus there is a well-knit social set up here. This social set up and the consequent discipline pervades all activities including fishing.

Traditional practices related to fishing

The following are some of the traditional practices related to fishing, adhered to by the people.

Selection of a local pilot - The villagers usually select one person as local pilot known as 'Arukath' who will normally be an expert fisherman thorough with fishing, local conditions, navigational routes etc. His main duty is to settle any dispute that may arise during fishing either in the lagoon or in the open sea. There will be an assistant pilot who will discharge his duty as pilot in the absence of the pilot. Because of this system, fishing is conducted in a disciplined and organized way. As mentioned earlier, the pilot besides settling any dispute oversees the

following activities, which are related to fishing.

Cleaning of channel - In the lagoon, there are some channels for the movement of boats to and from the sea. These channels are shallow for most part. When the boats ply during low tide, they are prone to hit the bottom if the channels have loose boulders and coral pieces. During the rough season (s.w.monsoon), these channels use to get filled with boulders and coral pieces. So every year by November, the channels are cleaned and deepened by removing all these materials. For this the local pilot will convene a meeting of all the village heads and boat owners and fix a day, usually a Friday for cleaning operation. On this day after Friday prayers, all will gather near the channel and wait for the low tide. The main channel is 'neerumagu'. Once the low tide begins, the pilot signals to start the work. Like that when the cleaning work is over, the pilot says 'odiyarau' meaning that they should get into the boat and return to the village. This is an annual job done in a very methodical way and above all in a festive mood. This is a typical example of cooperation, coordination and teamwork.

On either side of the channel, there are some huge, live coral colonies which remain submerged during high tide. So if not properly marked, they pose great risks to the boats. Therefore in order to identify and avoid such potential threats, normally some poles of coconut wood or some other wood are fixed on them as markers. The work of fixing these poles is shared by the community of fisherman. For every boat, a coral colony is assigned. It is obligatory for all the boats to fix the markers in the identified coral colony before the cleaning of the channel.

Exploitation of the live bait, apogons - Live baits are an integral part of pole and line fishing. Different baits are exploited from the lagoon among which apogonids locally known, as 'bothi' is an important group. They are naturally associated with corymbose, pedicellate corals with reticulately coalescent branches. They are nocturnal and most of them are mouthbreeders. So their population can be easily affected if there is uncontrolled exploitation. As a conservation measure, the Arukath has imposed certain restrictions on their exploitation. This is based on tradition. Normally the fishermen exploit this resource only after getting permission from the Arukath. Usually in November on a particular day, the Arukath will exploit the live bait and go for fishing. Only after this ritual, others can exploit the 'bothi.'

Prohibition in the use of net for fishing - The villagers or people from other islands are prohibited from using any type of net for fishing in the open sea near the coast. This is based on the belief that the use of net will drive away smaller fishes which consequently make the tunas flee from the coastal waters resulting in the failure of tuna fishery. This practice is meticulously followed notwithstanding the fact that many fishermen personally do not subscribe to this belief.

Tuna fishing from a shoal - During pole and line fishing, whenever two or more boats aim at approaching the same tuna shoals, the boat which reaches first has the right to go nearer the school. After the first boat, each subsequent boat according to its order of priority takes its rear position alternately either to the left or right of the boat, which is fishing just in front. None of the subsequent boat is supposed to overtake its predecessor boat while fishing from the same school till the shoal disperses or is completely fished. Violation of this general rule will invite suitable reprimand.

In the case of fishing from a shoal associated with flotsam, it is always the first boat that will fish along the inner circle. Other boats are not supposed to come closer to the shoal without the consent of the chief fisherman of the first boat. Such consent is normally given only after the boat is filled to capacity with tunas. More over, the flotsam is disturbed or removed only after the end of fishing by all the boats fishing from that shoal.

Remarks

The very fact that this system has been in vogue since a long time clearly indicates the support it gets from the people. For any management system to be effective, the support and cooperation of the beneficiaries are indispensable. These traditional practices and self imposed restrictions show remarkable agreement with the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries released by FAO which is based on the general principle that the right to fish carries with it an obligation to do so in a responsible manner.

References

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