

## World Story

# Not enough fish in the sea

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By Jalil Hamid

The old adage "there are plenty more fish in the sea" no longer rings true for Malaysian fisherman Shafie Said.

"These days, we have to go farther offshore and into deeper waters to fish," said Shafie, 39, his face weather-beaten after 16 years sailing tropical waters in the Andaman Sea, off the coast of northwest Malaysia.

"Sometimes we return empty-handed," Shafie said sadly.

It is a story told across Asia by millions of fishermen who ply the region's seas to bring home their main, and often only, source of income.

With Asia's extensive coastlines and poor populations, seafood is a staple that provides up to 70 per cent of animal protein in the diet.

But the tide is turning as fish stocks in Asia have declined by 70 per cent in the past 25 years, says Stephen Hall, head of WorldFish, a non-profit research body based in northern Malaysia.

"We are taking far too many fishes out of the sea and not leaving enough there to grow and regenerate," Hall said at his seaside office on the Malaysian resort island of Penang.

Compounding the problem is global warming, which will bring rising sea levels, higher sea-surface temperatures, higher salinity and greater weather extremes from droughts to storms.

Scientists predict mean sea levels will rise by 10-90cm over this century, with most estimates in the range of 30-50cm.

"This will likely damage or destroy many coastal ecosystems such as mangroves and salt marshes, which are essential to maintaining many wild fish stocks," explained a WorldFish report.

Warming seas are changing fish migration patterns with some fish heading south and others moving north, damaging entire ecosystems and affecting reproduction and replenishment rates.

Scientists in Australia are already warning of a huge decline in fish along the country's eastern seaboard with marine life such as yellow-fin tuna and stinging jellyfish moving towards Antarctica as sea waters warm.

"It's not a disaster for the ones that can move south. It is for the ones that can't move south," said Dr Alistair Hobday, the lead author of a recent report from the CSIRO, Australia's premier scientific institution.

Researchers say the implications of the global over-fishing crisis are greater for Asia than any other part of the world. Fish is a vital part of food security, employment and income in the region.

But although the number of fish in the sea is dropping dramatically, the demand for fish is rising as populations grow.

The Asian Development Bank has predicted that demand for fish in Asia will continue to rise, reaching 69 million tonnes by 2010 and accounting for 60 per cent of the world demand for fish for human consumption, compared to 53 per cent in 1990.

China with its 1.3 billion population and growing affluence is expanding its fish consumption, especially for expensive reef fish sold live at restaurants.

In the Philippines, a major source of reef fish, 90 per cent of fish stocks have been depleted, conservation group WWF said. Divers report seeing lifeless reefs in areas that were once teeming with fish.



The fishermen's baskets are not always full. Photo / Reuters

Last December, Philippine authorities rescued more than 1000 endangered humphead wrasse from poachers. The reef fish, which can sell for as much as US\$200 (\$272) a kilo, are adored by diners in China because their large lips are considered a delicacy.

In India, trawler nets catch turtles in their thousands and nesting sites such as Devi – where tens of thousands of Olive Ridley turtles would nest in a single night – are becoming devoid of turtles.

A shark species called "Karat hangar" has already vanished off the coast of Bangladesh along with sea-horses and other fish.

And it's not just the environment that is at risk. Fishermen in Asia and across the Indian Ocean in Africa are economically vulnerable to the decline in fish stocks, which directly affects their livelihoods, local economies and diet.

Poor and often uneducated, many are unaware of the need to help marine life rejuvenate by throwing back immature fish and avoiding catching turtles and other sea creatures in nets.

"Fishers need to reduce their reliance on narrow resources by learning to exploit a broader range of species and pursue alternative sources of income and fish production such as marine and aquaculture," Stephen Hall explained.

But teaching the world's estimated 29 million fishermen about sustain-able fishing is a huge task, especially as many live in countries where education systems are poor, poverty endemic and where there is little investment in aquaculture projects.

WorldFish suggests governments enforce tighter controls over fishing, such as limits on the number of boats allowed to operate in certain areas and vessel registration systems. But enforcing such systems may be close to impossible.

Another solution is expanding fish farms in Asia.

But these require significant investment as well as a successful campaign to convince fishermen to change their lifestyles from plying the seas for fish to raising them in ponds on land.

Bangladesh, one of the most impoverished countries in the world, relies on fish for about 80 per cent of its national animal protein intake. Yet the fish are disappearing, leaving Bangladeshi fishermen baffled and their incomes dropping.

"Many fish species have vanished and our prime catch of silvery Hisha is also dwindling," said fisherman Suleman Miah.

"The golden days of fishing are gone."

– REUTERS