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MALAYSIA

Fewer fish in the sea and they're smaller too

Declining fish stocks are forcing fishermen to go farther out to sea for a good catch

By Reme Ahmad, Malaysia Correspondent

PENANG - THE fishing grounds that Mr Nasir Othman favours are off mainland Penang, and on a typical day he picks a spot to cast his net based on his reading of the sea, the weather conditions, plus what he calls his 'gut feel'.

But in the last few years, said the 36-year-old fisherman, his reading of the waters has tended to yield fewer and smaller fish.

'We have to go further out and spend more time at sea to bring home the same value of catch,' said the 15-year veteran of the coastal seas of his usual haul of mackerel, pomfret and yellow-banded scad.

The prawns which are caught closer to the shoreline at his Sungai Abdul fishing base near Butterworth town have also become increasingly scarce.

Mr Nasir's is not a lone voice of complaint.

In Johor, Mr Chong Chee Seong, adviser to the 500-strong Batu Pahat and Muar Fishermen's Association, said: 'We seem to be catching 30 to 50 per cent fewer fish than five to 10 years ago.'

'I am worried that many fishermen may have to look for alternative jobs if this continues.'

The story is the same the world over, experts say, even as global consumption of fish more than doubled 103 million tonnes in the 30 years up to 2003, from 45 million tonnes in 1973.

Fish stocks in Asia, according to the Penang-based non-profit international research group WorldFish Centre, have declined by 70 per cent in the last 25 years.



SMALL CATCH: Fishermen at work on their nets in Penang. In the last few years, they have had to go farther out and spend more time at sea to bring home the same value of catch. According to WorldFish Centre, fish stocks in Asia have declined by 70 per cent in the last 25 years. -- PHOTO: REUTERS

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Experts have said for some time now that this is due to a combination of factors - overfishing, jump in dining-table demand, and a spike in the number of fishermen.

There is more bad news now.

Climate change has come into the picture and is slowly causing havoc in the seas by pushing up temperatures and water levels, creating more storms, making sea water more acidic, and threatening fish habitats and stocks, experts say.

The effects of climate change on fish species will vary, say experts. In a particular area, it may cause fast growth of one species of fish while in another it could result in faster depletion of another group, says the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), an arm of the United Nations.

Changes in weather conditions have been linked to changes in fish reproduction and replenishment rates.

In Australia, scientists say, warmer waters on the Tasmanian east coast have pushed out some species while introducing a new type of sea urchin in the area. The yellow-fin tuna, on the other hand, is moving further south towards the Antarctica.

Higher sea temperatures will also cause 'coral bleaching', or the killing of corals and reefs, which effectively reduces the natural home of many fish species.

Fears have been raised for the world's 200 million fishermen and their dependants whose livelihoods are to fishing and aquaculture.

'The effect of climate change on fisheries will impact a sector that is already characterised by full utilisation of resources, large over-capacity and conflict among fishers, and others, vying for alternative uses of marine ecosystems,' the FAO says on its website.

The FAO has classified most wild fisheries as fully exploited or over-exploited.

The effects of climate change could be more severe in the heavily populated mega-delta regions - such as Bangladesh and Vietnam's Mekong River - due to the increase in flooding which might wipe out fish habitats, said Dr Stephen Hall, director-general at WorldFish Centre.

'Fisheries and aquaculture are threatened by changes in temperature, and in freshwater ecosystems, by precipitation. Storms may become more frequent and extreme, imperilling habitats, stocks, infrastructure and livelihoods,' he said in an interview with The Straits Times.

Datuk Junaidi Che Ayub, director-general of the Malaysian Fisheries Development Authority, said an increase in global temperatures will reduce the catch from shallower waters as marine life heads for deep waters.

'Our fishermen will have to go further into the sea to get a good catch,' he said.

He is worried that climate change and rising sea levels will erode shorelines and affect the livelihood of the country's coastal fishermen.

Malaysia has about 90,000 fishermen, most of whom are coastal fishermen who use small-engined boats to net their catch a few kilometres offshore.

But perhaps all is not lost.

Governments from Malawi to China are increasingly turning to aquaculture, or fish farming, to keep up with the demand for seafood.

One successful example has been the WorldFish programme that developed the genetically improved farmed tilapia, or Gift, which is now reared in 13 countries.

Dr Hall said the fish grows up to 85 per cent larger than the original Nile tilapia, can be harvested three times a year, and costs 20 per cent less to produce.

Still, while the Malaysian government too is pushing for tilapia farming, Mr Nasir in Penang does not see himself moving into aquaculture.

'Few fishermen have the capital to start fish farms without heavy government support. I will stick with traditional fishing as I think there is still enough fish out there for me,' he said.

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The shortage of fish and the smaller size of fish could also have something to do with the fishing of sharks for shark's fin soup. Big sharks eat smaller sharks, who in turn eat fish, and this trickles down the food chain. If bigger sharks are killed, there are more smaller sharks and they end up eating more fish--the same fish humans like to eat. So, please stop eating shark's fin soup! It's been proven to have NO nutritional value and a synthetic version can be made which apparently tastes exactly the same. By removing the top predator from the ocean's food chain, all sealife (and now humans it seems) are affected.

Posted by: davnsan at Wed Jun 27 20:11:46 SGT 2007

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