

Aboard shrimp trawlers, a quiet revolution

News

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23 November 2006, Rome.

FAO-run project reduces environmental impacts - effort featured in BBC documentary

23 November 2006, Rome - Shrimp -- a small animal with a giant-sized footprint.

It is the world's most sought-after seafood commodity: some 3.5 million tons of the many-legged delicacy are pulled from the ocean's waters each year, with another 2.4 million tons raised on aquatic farms.

The popular seafood is a gold mine for poor countries feeding avid consumers in northern markets. Developing nations supply some 90% of the shrimp consumed in developed countries, to the tune of US\$8 billion a year. As a result, the jobs of hundreds of thousands of people in the developing world depend on shrimp.

But the sector is also one of the world's most wasteful fisheries.

In some places, for every kilo of shrimp that fishermen catch as much as 20 kilos of accidentally netted marine animals are tossed back overboard to die.

Generally, eight percent of all fish caught -- just over 7 million tons -- are discarded this way each year, FAO estimates. Of that total, tropical shrimp trawl fisheries have the highest "discard" rate, accounting for 27 percent of the waste -- 1.8 million tonnes of it.

New technology offers solutions

Discards of "by-catch" -- which are not only wasteful but can have broader environmental impacts on both specific fish stocks and entire ecosystems -- have been a concern of FAO's for years.

"The capture of juveniles of valuable fish before they have the chance to reproduce constitutes a threat to the well-being of fish populations, while extensive removal of non-targeted fish is a threat to marine ecosystem biodiversity, thus impacting on the productivity of a fishery," explains Jeremy Turner of the UN agency's Fisheries Department.

In 2002, FAO teamed up with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Global Environmental Facility to establish a US\$9 million five-year project that aims to reduce unwanted by-catch in shrimp fisheries.

As lead executing agency, FAO manages the project's activities in the field, working with trawlers, small-scale fishers, national fishery agencies and regional fisheries organizations to introduce new

technologies and fishing methods designed to target only desired fish of a certain size while letting small juveniles and non-targeted animals, like sea turtles, escape. (see sidebar)

FAO is providing technical assistance to help fishermen modify their trawls and equipment and is holding workshops to train them in their proper use and to discuss changes in fishing techniques that can also help. The Organization is also working with local authorities to conduct sea trials on vessels fitted with high tech sensors and underwater monitors that assess the effectiveness of the new trawls and trawling methods in order to further develop the technology.

At the same time, FAO is helping countries re-draft their fishing regulations so that they promote wider use of the new technology.

Dramatic results

"There have already been some dramatic results, with by-catch being reduced by as much as 50 percent in some cases," reports Turner.

This not only benefits local ecosystems and fish populations, making fishing grounds more productive, it also means financial savings for fishermen, since they don't need to spend as much time sorting and processing their catch.

In Asia, however, the situation is trickier. There, fishermen might earn as little as 1US\$ a day, and by-catch is often not discarded -- boat owners let their crews sell it for processing to meet demand for human and aquaculture consumption. "It represents an important source of income for them," explains Turner, "so you have to do more than just give them new technology."

Countries where FAO is implementing the project are Bahrain, Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela. The Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFEC) is also participating.

BBC documentary tackles by-catch issue, features FAO project

This weekend the shrimp trawling project will be featured in a new documentary produced by the UK-based Television Trust for the Environment in cooperation with FAO and scheduled for broadcast by the BBC.

The video, "Potted Shrimp", will run on BBC World's "Earth Report" at 21:30 GMT on Saturday 25 November, at 11:30 GMT Sunday 26 November, and 02:30 on Monday 27 November. (To confirm local times, visit the BBC World website.)

"We very much wanted to raise awareness about how these new trawl technologies can protect the marine environment and improve fisheries productivity," says Turner.

Filmed on location in FAO's Rome headquarters, Mexico and the Philippines, the 22 -minute film provides an excellent overview of the problem of by-catch and how modifications to fishing gear can make a difference, he adds.

"But despite these successes," he warns, "there remain real concerns about high levels of bycatch and the reasons behind them. There is still a long way to go -- ultimately, new technologies can only be part of the solution, not a silver bullet."

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