

# Traditional Knowledge Systems

Official recognition of traditional knowledge for resource management should empower, protect and advance conservation and allocation values

**T**raditional knowledge about aquatic resources and their habitats can be part of a larger, indivisible, world-view of nature—as seems to be the case with many indigenous and local peoples—or as part of a knowledge system based upon perception of fishery resources and fishing activities.

In different parts of the world, traditional institutions that ensure equity and sustainable use of resources are also part of indigenous and local communities. These traditional knowledge systems and institutions, in the inland, coastal and marine contexts, have been adapting to—or been adversely affected by—legal obligations, technology changes, market forces, and new demands on marine and coastal space from extractive, development and polluting activities.

Some of the articles in this issue of *SAMUDRA Report* attempt to set out the contours of how traditional knowledge systems have fared in relation to resource apportionment, conservation and management. While ordinary legal provisions are seen to safeguard old Sámi salmon fishing traditions and rights in Scandinavia, and are believed to secure the material foundation of Sámi culture (see page 4), the First Nations in Canada are concerned about the relevance of formal fisheries management systems (see page 8).

The First Nations of Canada are reluctant to support separation of fisheries from forest activities, hunting and other traditional practices, and view formal legal arrangements based on quota management systems as a threat to their traditional way of life. The First Nations fear that new fisheries management systems would lead to 'corporatization' of indigenous rights, and would displace both independent indigenous and local non-indigenous fishers from local waters, making way for large-scale fishing enterprises.

On the other hand, the traditional indigenous knowledge on coastal/marine environmental use and resource management of the Kuna people of Panama seeks strengths from modern science and technology, particularly on how to withstand the

onslaught of market forces (see page 28). The Kuna would consider utilizing, and effectively applying, national and international laws that support artisanal fisheries, conservation and management of fisheries resources, and protection of the marine environment.

The article on the *van chai* system of Vietnam (page 10) highlights how the modern State finds merit in a traditional system of implementing effective marine conservation and management measures. While communities in Indonesia welcome the newfound interest in recognizing

traditional systems and securing traditional rights under law, they are keen that some of the new legal instruments that allow privatization of coastal and marine resources be put on hold.

Although they vary in form and content, the legitimacy enjoyed by traditional and local knowledge systems is

a major asset in the design and implementation of bottom-up fisheries management systems, especially in nearshore waters. However, the challenge is to win the confidence of indigenous and local communities, who should be convinced that such recognition will not lead to any significant dilution of their values, or redefine their preferred allocation regimes for access to fishery resources, or privatize marine space, or introduce unacceptable quota-based management systems.

The recognition of traditional rights and systems under formal law should, therefore, aim to empower, protect and further the conservation and allocation approaches already embedded in indigenous and local value systems, with men and women playing equally vital roles. They should also serve to protect traditional institutions from external threats. In this sense, a scenario could be visualized where the State comes to the rescue of community values and the communities, in turn, extend cooperation and assistance in implementing a common programme of conservation and management of fisheries resources, and in discharging duties towards international obligations.

