

Nothing pretty SOUTH PACIFIC FISHERY UNDER THREAT

To the world outside, mention of South Pacific conjures up visions of pristine beaches, placid seas and lazy fun-filled days. But for the approximately 5 million population of the 10,000 islands of the region, life is no pretty jaunt, particularly for the fisherfolk. And that means just about everyone, for fishing not only provides the principal means of subsistence, fish is also the most important part of the islanders' diet.

The history of the Pacific Islands has been said to be a one of conflict over natural resources. While the focus in the past was land-based, since the 70s it has shifted to the ocean resources of fish, seabed minerals and the vast marine space.

In this period, foreign vessels, particularly from Japan, Korea, Taiwan and the US, have obtained licences for the exploitation of the islands' vast tuna resources. Now licensing agreements are increasingly being replaced with joint ventures, with minimal benefits of revenue and employment. Foreign corporations now control most of the resources and the profits they generate.

Over a fourth of the world's tuna production is currently from the South Pacific region. Yet, its share of the total value of the catch is abysmally low. In 1989, for instance, when distant water fleets caught tuna worth US \$ 700 million, the local nations got as access fees only about four per cent of this value.

Unfortunately, small-scale fisheries, which could be a source of fish for domestic consumption, have not been able to develop. Poor management, neglect of local sea tenure practices, rising costs and weak government support are among the reasons for this.

On the other hand, the development of commercial fishery poses a threat to the islanders' subsistence fishing, depleting the inshore waters. Although reef and lagoon waters are not leased out to foreigners, tuna long-lining depends on traditional baitfishery in the inshore waters.

Commercialised baitfishing leads to oil pollution of inshore waters and other ecological consequences. Local fishermen fear that excessive harvesting of bait fish, which they believe form the food for the species they normally catch, would ultimately decrease the catch potential of their own subsistence fishery.

Further, as reported from the Solomon Islands, tuna boats that speed past the shore swamp canoes, erode shorelines and endanger children playing in the lagoons. To worsen matters, poaching and indiscriminate driftnetting have been on the rise since the 1970s.

The origin of these threats are not confined to the sea.

Land-based development activities have serious implications since the islands are small land masses in the midst of a vast ocean. Mangroves have been removed along the coconut plantations. Logging and prospecting for minerals (gold, copper, nickel, silver and manganese) causes sediment pollution, adversely affecting the sustainability of the traditional fishing grounds.

Tourism, especially of the resort variety financed by international capital, often shows scant respect for traditional cultural values and also leads to the theft of rare shells and precious corals from the seabed.

Increasing urbanization is another related problem, especially in countries like Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu.

Sadly, the Pacific has long been an arena for military abuse. The establishment of military bases and half a century of missile and nuclear testing must surely have permanently contaminated the area and made much of its waters radioactive. There have also been attempts to dump nuclear wastes into the Pacific waters. Though there already is evidence of food-chain contamination in this area, other effects could be concealed or underreported.

The South Pacific region is set to become a major hive of industrial activity, with foreign companies scrambling for mining rights, ocean leasing, and oil-gas prospecting licences. The implications for the region and its people are frightening.

As one observer asks, "*The Japanese, the Americans, the South Koreans, the Chinese, the Canadians, some Latin Americans, the West Germans, the French and a number of ASEAN nations now talk with monotonous regularity about the Pacific century. When the Pacific century is over, will it be said that islanders slept through it all while those who controlled the mechanisms of power in island states, with few exceptions, danced late into a weary night, celebrating plunder disguised as development?*"

In view of the continuing exploitation of small fishworkers in the South Pacific, ICSF has decided to try and create a network, among them, after identifying local fishworkers' organizations as well as NGOs working with fishing communities. This initiative will also attempt to document the problems of the region.

Towards this end, a three-member ICSF team will visit countries from Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, in addition to New Zealand during January –March 1993. This will hopefully be the first step in a long-term effort to further contacts in the Pacific region. ■