

Comment

Why bulldoze the seabed?

Trawlers have often been referred to as the Hoovers of the shelf bottom or as bulldozers unselectively mowing down fish and benthic species. Ever since its introduction over a century ago, fishworkers in different parts of the world have been voicing their concern about its immense destructive capacity.

In spite of this, the technology continued to develop and, during the Second World War, it incorporated many advancements developed by the navy. The introduction of trawlers led to bloodshed in the sea in the Malacca Straits, both off Malaysia and Indonesia. Now, from different parts of the world comes proof of its limitation: a staggering ability to overfish.

The decimation of ground stocks in many of the world's fisheries clearly demonstrates how this technology kills the resource base. The collapse of the cod fishery of Canada, the cape hake fishery of South Africa, and the overfishing of prawns and shrimp resources in many Asian countries stand brutal testimony to the destructive impact of trawling technology.

Worldwide experience to date has shown that monitoring, surveillance and enforcement have consistently failed to protect both resources and the livelihood of inshore fishworkers. Such collapse of fisheries threatens—either directly or indirectly—the livelihood of these fishworkers. Crucially enough, they are often the very ones without recourse to any other means. The article by Vicky Silk in this issue of SAMUDRA graphically illustrates how the fishery of Newfoundland, Canada was destroyed by trawling, and how this particularly affected women

To be sure, there could be instances where well-managed trawl fisheries may not prove very harmful. But today there is growing conviction that political circumstances the world over do not permit any wise management of trawl fisheries.

In economic, social and environmental terms, unmanaged trawl fisheries are the worst kind. And in physical terms, their destructiveness is matched only by dynamite fishing. Perhaps the time has come for everyone involved in fisheries to reassess the assumed values of this technology. This is especially necessary since the combination of trawling and corporate interest has catastrophic consequences.

Elsewhere in this issue, Nalini Nayak of India seeks the support of consumers in restraining trawling activities, given that attempts to manage them at sea have failed. It has perhaps become imperative to begin focusing on demand management, to strive for a situation where consumers themselves would dictate to suppliers in no uncertain terms what they would like to eat.

Imagine a time when fish consumers start proclaiming that they would prefer to consume only those fish and prawns caught with passive gears, or reared in extensive or semi-intensive tract, which do not destroy mangroves, for instance. Imagine a situation where the world's seafood eaters actually begin demanding only those fish processed in factories by managements which respect the dignity of labour and employ fishworkers on equitable terms.

Can we—indeed, should we—leave this to the realm of mere imagination?

