

Artisanal fishers

Don't ignore us

Malaysia's new economic prowess does not seem to have encompassed the problems of its small-scale fishers

As Malaysia races to its new national goal of becoming the next Asian economic powerhouse, the country's coastal fisherpeople find themselves still immersed in chronic and growing problems.

Some of these issues were highlighted at the Malaysian Coastal Fishermen's Workshop from 25 to 27 July 1995 in Penang. Organized by Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM or Friends of the Earth, Malaysia), the workshop brought together 15 coastal fishermen's representatives from the States of Kedah, Peninsular and Johor.

During this workshop, numerous problems were raised and discussed. Most of these were the familiar ones encountered by countless numbers of artisanal fisherpeople around the world: pollution of rivers and coasts; encroachment into inshore waters by trawlers; dwindling catches; new ecological predicaments thrown up by aquaculture; and the absence of sound fishery management and enforcement policies.

One problem, particularly pronounced in Kuala Kurau in Perak and Kuala Tunjang in Kedah, is the tendency to convert mangrove swamps into crab and prawn breeding farms. This practice has destroyed the breeding ground of several species of fish. Further, the mangrove swamps served as a barrier to protect the shore from the fury of the waves. Once cleared, the result is erosion.

In Pulau Pangkor in Perak, Kuala Perlis in Perlis and Pontian in Johor, chemical and organic pollutants from factories, hotels and pig farms have also affected the catch of the local fishermen. S. M.

Mohammed Idris, president of SAM, urged the Malaysian Fisheries Department and the Marine Police to enforce existing laws and arrest those who violated the laws.

He also suggested that seafood exports be reduced to prevent the export market from further commercializing Malaysia's fisheries and overexploiting marine resources.

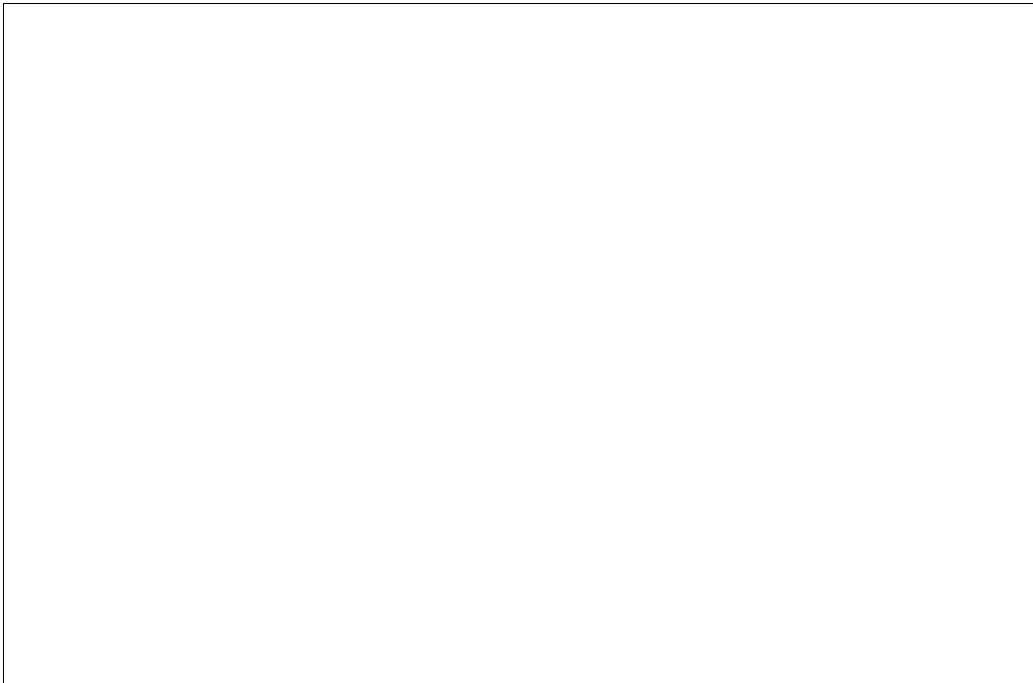
The workshop formulated and adopted a resolution, which was presented to the authorities in the Malaysian government. The resolution urged the Department of Fisheries to enforce the relevant laws and to control and prevent incursions into the coastal waters by trawlers and Kenka boats ('apollo nets').

It requested the authorities to increase the number of the armed enforcement personnel to face the increasing incursions of trawlers into the coastal waters of Malaysia. It asked the State governments to notify in the official gazette mangrove forest areas as reserves for conservation purpose to maintain biodiversity, prevent erosion and conserve feeding, refuge and breeding grounds for fisheries.

The resolution called on State governments to be careful and meticulous in planning industrial developments nation-wide so that their implementation would neither result in marine pollution nor threaten the livelihoods of small-scale or coastal fishers.

Act effectively

The participants at the workshop requested the Department of Environment to act effectively to control, reduce and prevent marine and river pollution in Malaysia by effectively enforcing the amended Environmental Quality Act of 1974.



They also urged the government to carefully plan all development so that the benefits will be equitably distributed and in a manner that the coastal fishermen's livelihood are not threatened.

middlemen in the marketing of fish catches.

The resolution entreated the Department of Fisheries, Department of Environment and the Marine Department to co-operate and consolidate their forces to prevent the recurrence of the dumping of sludge by tankers in Malaysian coastal areas. Sludge dumping threatens marine resources and only exacerbates the coastal fishers' problems.

The workshop beseeched the Department of Fisheries to ban the shell-dredging boats, which are operating in the Perlis and Kedah coasts. It also requested the government to control, reduce and prevent the destruction of coral reefs, which are important in maintaining the fishery ecology.

On the question of poverty, the resolution urged the government to pay immediate attention to the issue and to take appropriate actions to alleviate the plight of the coastal fishers.

The participants called on the Malaysian Fisheries Development Board and the National Fishermen's Association to play their roles effectively to overcome the problems posed by profiteering

This piece is based on material sent by Nora Ibrahim of Sahabat Alam Malaysia, whose Artisanal Fishermen's Network is co-ordinated by Zulkifli Yusuf