

## Fishing conflicts

## Thai boxing

### Fishing for anchovies using light-luring devices has led to the greatest conflict ever in Thai fisheries

The most important species of fish caught from Thai waters is anchovy, locally called *pla katak*, distributed in both the inshore and offshore waters at depths ranging from 5 m to 60 m, with 70 per cent of the resources distributed in the Gulf of Thailand. In terms of quantity, at 174,000 tonnes, anchovy comes just behind trash fish (over one million tonnes) in Thailand's fish production for 1996.

Anchovy catches generate an annual foreign exchange earning of over US\$30 million for the Thai economy, but today a new type of fishing for anchovies has become the bone of contention between two groups of Thai fishworkers.

Due to increasing demand for boiled and dried anchovies in the export market, the total anchovy production increased about eight-fold, from around 20,000 tonnes in the 1970s to around 160,000 tonnes in the 1990s. As the demand picked up, the anchovy fishermen adopted a technique of fishing with light-luring devices, originally used for squid fishing.

As a result, many squid fishermen changed their target species to anchovies, and many small and medium-sized trawlers also converted their vessels to operate anchovy purse-seines or anchovy falling nets (semi-rectangular shaped nets whose width equals the length of the boats). But these activities were confined to waters beyond 5 km from the seaboard and the fishermen were not allowed to use a mesh below 2.5 cm.

The situation, however, radically changed when the then Deputy Minister for Agriculture, Monthon Kraiwatnusorn, by an order dated 15 March 1996, reduced the no-light-luring fishing zone from five to three km, and removed the minimum

mesh size requirement of 2.5 cm in the Gulf of Thailand, ostensibly to allow for catching of high-value small-sized anchovies called *sai mai*, for the export market. These anchovies, when boiled and dried, would fetch a price six times higher than that for the adults in the same category. The Department of Fisheries' rationale was that even after using small-meshed anchovy fishing nets, the by-catch would be only 10 per cent, which was an acceptable level.

The notification led to the migration of trawler-converted anchovy boats in the category less than 18 m long, with light-luring devices. These were owned mainly by Chinese capital and operated, since 1996, by Buddhist workers from the eastern seaboard who migrated to the southern seaboard, the mainstay of Muslim small-scale fishers.

About 100 such boats thus moved south during the southwest monsoon period with their anchovy purse-seines and falling nets. The fishing range of these boats ranged up to 60 m depth zones and also included waters traditionally harvested by the local fishermen using boats less than 14 m long. One of the provinces affected by this migration was Songkhla, which has an abundant anchovy stock, thanks to the nutrients from the shrimp aquaculture farms that end up in the coastal waters.

#### Production decline

The migration of the eastern anchovy falling-net fleet took place at a time when the local production of species like anchovies, crab, squid and shrimp were on the decline. The local fishermen attributed this decline to light-luring fishing by the migrant anchovy boats—fish that feed on anchovies could no longer be found in these waters.



**Thailand**



**L**ight-luring fishing also leads to the catching of juveniles, which are important for restocking the traditional fisheries. Moreover, since inshore catches have dropped, the local fishermen have to go farther out into the sea for fish. They also complained of a decline in their incomes from anchovy fisheries during the day. Monthly income, for example, has declined from Baht20,000-30,000 to Baht1,500-6,000. Many small-scale fishermen have been forced to become labourers in seafood factories.

While they did not mind day fishing for anchovies with nets not less than 2.5 cm mesh size, they were fiercely opposed to light-luring fishing. All fishers who used gear without the aid of lights were affected by light-luring fishing.

On 16 October 1997, the small-scale fishermen mounted a protest at the Provincial Town Hall demanding that the Songkhla area be made free of night fishing for anchovies. In March 1998, the small-scale fishermen intensified their protest and blockaded the Songkhla bay. According to a report of the Department of Fisheries, all people in Songkhla were affected by this blockade since the price of gasoline, cooking oil, seafood, and other essential goods went up. The small-scale fishermen struck again with their blockade in July 1998. The Governor of the province responded and, by a Provincial Notification dated 28 July 1998, declared the bay off limits for light-lure fishing for anchovies.

As a result of objections raised by the anchovy processors and fishermen against the Notification, a Public Hearing was organized on the issue on 26 December 1998, which was boycotted by the small-scale fishermen. The Notification, the Hearing observed, was difficult to implement because there was no demarcation of the provincial territorial areas and because it was in

violation of the Article 46 and 56 of the 1997 Constitution, namely, right to personal earnings. The Hearing, inter alia, proposed that trawls and push nets be banned all over the country.

On 3 June 1999, the National Fishery Policy Committee proposed a zoning system to resolve the conflicts. According to this proposal, light-lure fishing for anchovies was made permissible in the 5-12 km zone for boats less than 16 m long and, beyond 12 km, for boats greater than 16 m long. The zoning system, however, was rejected outright by the small-scale fishermen, on the ground that light would attract small fish from shallow waters. They stuck to their demand for a total ban

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on light-lure fishing. The National Fishery Policy Committee had difficulty in accepting this demand because of the heavy investment that was already made in light-lure fishing. Since, on average, around Baht300,000-400,000 would have been spent on modifying and equipping an old trawler with a generator, the Committee wanted to give the vessels in light-lure fisheries a chance to recoup their investments. It feels that the fleet should be given another five years to phase out light-lure fishing.

This approach led to a new wave of unrest. On 13 June 1999, according to newspaper reports, about 300 small fishing boats converged in the Songkhla bay and the port was once again blockaded. Freighters were tied up. Cruise ships had to delay their arrivals. Gasoline prices shot up. The export industry, especially of rubber and food products, including seafood, was also hit.

#### **Out of work**

The canned tuna industry in the south, dependent on imported raw materials, got crippled, and 350 part-time port workers found themselves with no work and no pay. Losses amounting to Baht100 million (US\$3 million) were reported. The

blockade was described by one of its leaders as a show of force to dramatize the small-scale fishermen's grievances in the light of the threat posed by anchovy fishing at night time. There were also demonstrations against anchovy fishing in different places. The blockade of the port went on for over a fortnight until the navy removed it on 27 June 1999.

**T**he anchovy fishermen rebut the argument that their fishing practices are destroying marine resources. In purse-seine fisheries, they agree, there is a 22-38 per cent by-catch during the night and 6 per cent during the day. But in falling-net operations, which are undertaken only at night, the by-catch rates are only 7-16 per cent, which is acceptable by any standards.

In Songkhla, they contend, only falling nets are used in anchovy fisheries. The anchovy fishermen, on the other hand, hold trawlers and push-nets to be far more destructive than anchovy fishing. They claim these fishing practices to be a greater threat to natural fish stocks than light-lure fishing.

In Chumphon, the anchovy fishermen staged a counter-protest. In Trat, 3,000 anchovy fishermen demonstrated before the provincial hall in Muang district, demanding that the conflict be settled. The large-scale anchovy fishers have threatened to blockade the Chumphon

bay if commercial use of fine-mesh nets and lights are banned within 5 km of the shore.

In an editorial, the Bangkok Post wrote that registration of anchovy boats equipped with lighting for night fishing must come to an end and the existing fleet must be phased out. The paper wanted this to be implemented as soon as possible, after giving a chance to the anchovy fishermen to recover their investment.

The small-scale fishermen are reportedly supported by the New Democratic Party, which apparently has the backing of the Thai Muslim community, including fishermen. The government does not openly want to highlight the ethnic dimension of the conflict, as the policy of the King, who is the constitutional head, is to talk about equality between different communities, not difference.

#### **Study underway**

On 15 June 1999, the Agriculture Minister, Pongpol Adireksarn, promised to consider the demand for a ban on night fishing. The demand has been forwarded to the National Fisheries Policy Committee. The Committee, which met to resolve this issue on 28 June 1999, has decided to further study the environmental and socioeconomic impact of anchovy fisheries, and the problems with law enforcement in fisheries. Its report is expected by October 1999.

**T**he women who work in the anchovy boiling and drying business are against any ban on light-lure fisheries for anchovies. They reportedly earn about Baht5,000-6,000 a day per family (going up to Baht10,000), which is ten times what they would otherwise earn from prawn peeling. These women do not believe that anchovy is being overfished since the fish has a short life cycle of one year. About 4,000 women are involved in anchovy boiling, and they follow the fishers to the Andaman Sea during the northeast monsoon.

No blood has yet been spilt as a result of these conflicts in Thai waters. However, it has turned out to be the most significant conflict in the history of Thai fisheries. Those for and against anchovy fisheries with light-luring techniques, are indulging in a no-holds-barred campaign to either ban or maintain this fisheries. ♣

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