
TELLING OUR STORY 2005-10



**FISHERIES IMPROVED
FOR SUSTAINABLE HARVEST (FISH) PROJECT**

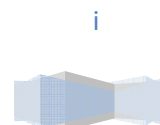
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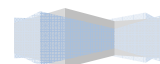
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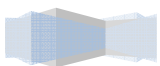
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A Fisheries Manager's Job is Never Done



(Photo:A. Sia)

Ma. Theresa Rabe is no pen-pusher -- the constant challenge of fisheries management keeps this government worker on her toes.

Having been involved in development work for many years, Ma. Theresa Rabe has faced many tough challenges, but none tougher than fisheries management. "It's a constant challenge, the pressure never ends," she says.

In 1997, when she became municipal agriculturist of Busuanga town in Palawan, Philippines, Rabe's first order of business was to find out what she was up against. "I did an agri-fisheries survey, which showed that a big majority of the people here were dependent on livelihood. Fisheries had to be my top priority," she relates.

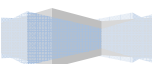
Rabe, an agricultural engineer, admits she had almost zero knowledge of fisheries. "But I didn't need a degree in fisheries to know that our fishing sector was in big trouble. Declining fish yields, illegal fishing, degraded habitats and poverty were just the more obvious issues that cried for attention."

She worked through each problem, consulting with experts along the way. "I gained proficiency, but it didn't make the job easier. A great chunk of my job involves regulating fisheries -- I realized early on just how tough that was."

Fighting off pressure from groups with interests in illegal fishing, she soldiered on. Assisted by the USAID FISH Project and working with fishing villages, she and her staff established two marine sanctuaries managed by community members, who also helped in law enforcement.

"We've had a few setbacks, but we've made great progress. Fishers are happy that the corals and fish are back. To me, the best thing is seeing the communities transformed from indifferent observers or even participants in illegal fishing to active advocates and protectors of the sea."

But the challenge remains. "Illegal fishers are always up to something," says Rabe. "But if they are persistent, so are we. We will never put our guard down." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/08/10)



This Sea Advocate is Not Quitting Soon



(Photo:A. Sia)

Looking to a sustainable future for fisheries, Alicia Selestra does her ‘citizen’s duty’ as a champion of the sea.

Sixty-nine-year-old Alicia Selestra describes herself as a “retired public servant,” even if she remains active in advocacy work for marine and fisheries conservation and management. “I see it as my citizen’s duty,” she quips. “I’m not a fisher, but I’m a fish consumer. If you eat fish, it’s not hard to notice that our fisheries have declined.”

Even so, Selestra, a three-term municipal councilor of Busuanga town in Palawan, Philippines, admits, “I really did not fully comprehend how much we’d lost to destructive fishing and other unsustainable practices until the FISH Project came here in 2004.”

The USAID FISH Project provided training, information-education-communication, enforcement and other support to fishing communities and the Busuanga government. “I saw at once how we needed the Project when it was presented to us,” says Selestra, who was municipal councilor when the Project started.

During her term, Selestra supported a number of ordinances that helped institutionalize some key fisheries management measures in the local government. Today as a member of the Environmentally Critical Areas Network Board, she continues her advocacy work for the sea.

“The full recovery of our marine resources or sustainable fisheries will not happen in my lifetime, but that doesn’t make it less of a concern for me,” Selestra says. “We are all part of the fisheries problem, therefore we must all take part in its solution.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/08/10)

A Healthy Legacy for the Sea



(Photo: A. Sia)

Mayor Eva de Jesus is credited for taking concrete steps to address her town's critical fisheries issues.

Among the first mayors to show concrete support for the USAID FISH Project when it started field operations in Calamianes, Palawan, Philippines in 2004 was Eva de Jesus, then the mayor of the municipality of Busuanga. De Jesus, who described herself as an 'interim mayor,' served a single three-year term. But she started a development process that continues to change the lives of her town's largely fishing population.

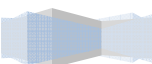
In an interview with the FISH Project in early 2008, De Jesus was modest about her accomplishments. "It was really my husband's program, I just continued it," she said, explaining, "My husband Samuel completed the maximum three terms as mayor and was disqualified by law from running in 2004. Instead he encouraged me to seek the office. He ran again in the 2007 elections, won and is serving a new first term."

De Jesus might play down her achievements, but others fully credit her for taking important measures that may yet save the town's rich but high threatened marine resources. Assisted by the FISH Project, her administration established a number of community-based marine sanctuaries, organized and trained community-based law enforcement teams, and promoted public awareness of coastal issues.

"All I asked our people was to follow the law and support municipal policies," she said. "It's been a slow process, but I see positive changes. Little by little, voluntary compliance by fishers has grown. With more effort, persistence and time, Busuanga can achieve sustainable fisheries."

De Jesus did not live to realize her vision. She died of cancer at the age of 48 last November 28, 2008.

Her healthy legacy for the sea lives on. (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/08/10)



Village-Based Marine Conservation Yields Benefits



(Photo: A. Sia)

As the benefits of marine conservation become more evident, sanctuary proponents like Ronelo Cabangon have an easier time picking up support for their cause.

Fishers operating around the Sagrada-Bogtong marine reserve reacted in a typical manner when the reserve was established in 2006: Fearing loss of income, they protested. And typically, many were converted after seeing the benefits of conservation.

Located at Busuanga town in Palawan, Philippines the Sagrada-Bogtong marine reserve covers 390 hectares of mostly coral reef habitat. It is jointly managed by the neighbor villages of Sagrada and Bogtong.

Ronelo Cabangon was Bogtong's village chief when the marine reserve was proposed by the USAID FISH Project in 2005. "They explained to me that we needed a protected area to serve as breeding and nursery areas for fish," he relates. "The proposal made sense to me, so I supported it."

Others were not immediately convinced.

"The restrictions made fishers nervous. They thought they would lose their livelihood," says Cabangon. "I told them what the FISH Project told me. Some understood, others reserved judgment, the rest simply ignored me."

Today, more than three years after the sanctuary was established, fishers are reaping the benefits of protection. Notes Cabangon, "In the past, the average fish catch here was not even 2kg. Now it's between 3-5kg, consisting of better quality and bigger size fish."

Fisher Ricardo Manaois Jr says as much. "We're definitely catching more fish. I also see some types of fish that have gone scarce beginning to come back, like the groupers," he says.

Only about 20-30 percent of fishers in Bogtong still try to poach on the sanctuary, says Cabangon. "Maybe the community will never be 100 percent behind us, but getting support for the sanctuary is easier now that there are many more of us. No matter what happens, we must keep educating the fishers, and we must continue protecting the sanctuary." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/08/10)

Looking Beyond Party Lines to Sustain Fisheries



(Photo: A. Sia)

Despite losing his re-election bid, village chief Reynante Arceo remains committed to promote sustainable fisheries and the small fishers' welfare.

Sustainable fisheries advocate Reynante Arceo served two terms as village chief of Concepcion, Busuanga in Palawan, Philippines. He lost his bid for a third term, when he heavily supported marine conservation initiatives in his village. But that did not lose him the election, he maintains.

“It was just coincidence. The only people who were actively opposing our conservation initiatives were the illegal fishers, and they’re a minority here. Maybe the voters just felt that electing a new leader was the better option.”

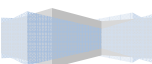
Despite his election loss, Arceo keeps his commitment to the cause of marine conservation, which began when the USAID FISH Project proposed a marine reserve at his village.

Officially established in 2006, the 219-hectare marine reserve is administered by community members who trained under the FISH Project in the various aspects of reef management and fish conservation.

Relates Arceo, “We initially presented FISH Project’s proposal at one of our village assemblies. There were a lot of questions, but in the end the majority realized a marine reserve would help our small fishers most. Any opposition came mostly from reputed illegal fishers, so we decided to go ahead and accept the proposal.”

The benefits of protection became evident pretty quickly. “It did not take one year for us to see improvements in fish stocks and habitats within and around the reserve,” says Arceo. “During that time, we succeeded in totally eliminating dynamite fishing in the area.”

Arceo remains active in the management of the marine reserve, and vows to support his political rivals’ conservation initiatives. “I look beyond party lines. To me, it does not matter who get elected. For as long as they pursue marine conservation and sustainable fisheries and promote the small fishers’ welfare, they have my support.” (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 1/08/10)



An Empowered Community

Participatory assessment promotes community involvement in resource management



Fishers identify critical issues and concerns affecting fisheries in their community

In Busuanga, Palawan, Philippines, fishers are taking charge of their community's future.

Challenge

Busuanga, Palawan faces the same predicament as any typical Philippine coastal town: highly resource-dependent, it is fast losing its once bountiful marine resources. Its naturally productive marine ecosystems are seriously degraded from decades of destructive fishing and overexploitation, impacting its economy and endangering the well-being and way of life of its large fishing community.

Initiative

As a partner of the Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, the local government of Busuanga has embarked on a coastal resource management program that has remarkably deepened the local community's understanding and appreciation of the importance of the proper management of their coastal and fishery resources.

Participatory coastal resource assessment (PCRA) training, in particular, afforded local fishers the chance to see for themselves the sorry state of their coastal resources. This heightened their sense of the urgency of resource management, and their sense of responsibility for making it happen. Increasingly, fishers shared their thoughts and ideas, and then their time and effort in the collective endeavor to manage their resources.

Upon their urging, the municipal government and concerned barangays (villages) established two marine protected areas (MPAs) run by their respective MPA Management Boards composed of local stakeholders, notably members of the Barangay Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Management Councils.

Results

The fishers' involvement in participatory assessment exercises and eventually resource management gave them not only the requisite knowledge and skills but also the motivation and impetus to take charge of their coastal resources and their community's future. Municipal Agriculturist Tess Rabe observes, "Our fishers have become more outspoken in asserting for their preferential rights in the utilization of municipal waters. They help protect and manage local resources. Very often, they tell us how we can improve resource management. For example, many fishers tell us they want their own MPAs, heartened by stories from fishers in those villages where we set up the MPAs who say their fish catch has increased." (*R Cabungcal, FISH Project, 12.14.06*)

Marine Park Proves Protection Makes Economic Sense

Park earns Php850,000 in user fees, helps restore fish stocks



Eduardo Tuguay (left) and Jose Mazo fabricate marker buoys tailor-made and color-coded for the Siete Pecados Marine Park. (Photo:A. Sia)

Eduardo Tuguay remembers a time when beach seines came in droves to his village in Coron, Palawan in western Philippines. “In their heyday, scores of beach seines operated here, and still they managed to catch tons and tons of anchovy,” he relates.

Those boom years are gone. Anchovy stocks in the area are virtually in a state of collapse and other fish stocks are visibly diminished, hit hard by years of overfishing and destructive fishing, including trawling and the use of dynamite and cyanide.

The USAID FISH Project supported the Coron municipal government and communities in addressing these issues. Among the focus of such support was the 21-hectare Siete Pecados Marine Park, now regarded as one of the most successful protected areas in Coron.

“The park is benefiting the entire town,” says park ranger Jose Mazo.

“The park was set up before FISH support came in, but we couldn’t enforce it properly for lack of funding,” says park ranger Jose Mazo.

Mazo, a radio technician, and Tuguay, a local trader who chairs the village fisheries and aquatic resource management council, took turns guarding the park, with little help from others in the community. “We had the full support of our village chief. But because everything we did for the park was unpaid work with few prospects for monetary compensation, most people were unwilling to spend time on guard duty, especially the fishers, who were earning barely enough to feed their families,” Mazo explains.

FISH helped fund the installation of marker buoys and a guardhouse, promoted community involvement in park management through training and information-education-communication, and pushed for policy support for the park. This paved the way for the full implementation of a user fee system and overall better enforcement of and compliance with park rules and regulations.

Since then, the park has generated about Php850,000 in total user fees, part of which are reverted to the village to finance the park’s operations and development projects. Fish stocks have begun to recover, fishers are catching more fish, and community support is stronger than ever. Where beach seines and trawlers used to run rampage, now tourists take their fill of the sight of beautiful corals and fishes, and the locals are discovering a sense of pride in how well their coral reefs are being appreciated by visitors.

All this has only strengthened Mazo’s and Tuguay’s resolve to continue the work they have started. “The park is benefiting not only our village but the entire town. This inspires me to do more and better,” says Mazo. Adds Tuguay, “Call me a braggart, but I am certain we have the best managed marine park in all of Coron.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/04/10)

Fishers Cope with New Challenges



(Photo: A. Sia)

Mateo Catubig watches over a fish sanctuary at his village. He believes the sanctuary helps fish stocks to better withstand various stresses.

Like a typical fisher, Mateo Catubig estimates potential fish catch according to the season. “We usually catch more fish during the ‘ber’ months all the way to February or March, when the sea is cooler,” he says. In normal circumstances he is usually right.

Between 2007 and 2008, however, Catubig’s projections were a bit off: Fishers in his village were catching fewer fish than expected. What’s more, “it seemed the sea was a bit warmer than normal.”

This is his theory: Fish catch was affected by the warmer-than-usual sea temperature that year.

“A number of us fishers in this village use gill nets that float in midwater or near the water surface. Many fishes were probably avoiding the warmer water column near the sea surface by staying closer to the sea bed, nowhere near our nets.”

No fish kill occurred, but even if some fish stocks were actually lost to the unexpected warming of the sea, Catubig believes they would have been replaced by new recruits from a fish sanctuary nearby. The protected (and therefore healthy) habitats and fish stocks in the sanctuary would be more resilient to environmental stress, including changes in sea temperature.

Located at Bintuan in Coron town, Palawan, Philippines, the sanctuary was established in 2004 with the help of the USAID FISH Project, which trained fishers and other community members in resource protection and management. In addition to increasing fish stocks, the sanctuary has a user fee system that generates funds that pay for its maintenance and various village-level development projects. (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 01/07/10)

She Stops ‘Bullies’ with a Smile



(Photo: A. Sia)

Maria Lourdes Alvarez performs her fish warden duties in a calm manner – and with a smile.

As a fish warden, Maria Lourdes Alvarez has had her share of encounters with combative individuals. Her primary role is to collect tickets from divers and snorkelers visiting her village’s marine sanctuary, as well as to stop any illegal entry by fishers and other unauthorized persons into the sanctuary.

“I don’t think my job is all that risky, but I have met quite a few aggressive trespassers, especially in the early days of our enforcement of the sanctuary,” Alvarez says.

Called Decalve Marine Sanctuary, the sanctuary is located at Coron, Palawan, Philippines. It was set up in 2004 with assistance from the USAID FISH Project, which helped to train Alvarez’s enforcement team.

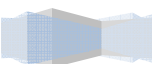
Alvarez recalls an incident that happened shortly after a user fee system was introduced at the sanctuary.

“I stopped a visitor because he had no ticket. He was quite the bully, very aggressive. He argued I had no authority to deny him entry anywhere. Maybe because I’m small, he thought he could intimidate me.”

Alvarez refused to back down. “I said – very nicely – that the area had been declared a sanctuary, and a user fee system was in place,” she relates. “I told him to bring his issues to my village chief. He did, and in the end he personally apologized to me.”

Alvarez is unsure that people respond differently to her because she is a woman. “I don’t know that being a woman matters one way or the other, but being a calm person is a definite advantage,” she says, adding, “A smile helps a lot.”

Violations appear to have tapered off. “The FISH Project helped us with public information and education,” says Alvarez. “People know more about the sanctuary’s purpose and why everyone must follow its rules. Most are cooperating.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/08/10)



Thinking Ecosystem



(Photo: A. Sia)

(Left to right) Village officials Wilfrando Hizarsa and Edmundo Sotto oversee the management of a mangrove area vital to several towns' fisheries productivity.

Edmundo Sotto and Wilfrando Hizarsa are local officials of Guadalupe village in Coron, Palawan, Philippines, that at first glance does not seem particularly significant to the area's fisheries.

"We have a very small fishing population," says Sotto, who is Guadalupe's village chief.

"But we have jurisdiction over this mangrove area that is a major source of fry for other villages that rely heavily on fishing, including those in our neighbor towns. The responsibility to protect this important resource falls on us."

Both Sotto and Hizarsa, a member of the village council, were once engaged in fisheries. Sotto used to be a live fish trader, while Hizarsa was a fisherman, so they both witnessed the rise and decline of fisheries in their town.

"There definitely are fewer fish in our waters, and too many fishers chasing after them," observes Hizarsa. "If we don't act now, the whole town could suffer."

Assisted by the USAID FISH Project, the municipal government has declared the area as a sanctuary. "We have a people's organization trained by the FISH Project to manage the sanctuary," says Hizarsa. The plan is for community members to patrol the area 24/7.

Adds Sotto, "Because most of our people are not fishers, it would seem that our village does not have as much motivation to care for the sea as those in other villages. But in truth we all have a stake in keeping our sea healthy, and people are beginning to realize this." (A. Sia, *FISH Project, 1/1/10*)

Fishing for the Future



(Photo:A. Sia)

Pableo Trapero turned his back on illegal fishing when he realized he was creating a bleak future for his children.

At certain points in his checkered life, Pableo Trapero got involved in some shady activities. At age 14, he joined a muro-ami operation and much later, engaged in blast fishing. He was also a runner for an illegal gambling operation, and just stopped short of dealing in illegal drugs.

Today, he claims to keep his life above board. “I run a growout operation for grouper,” he says, professing disgust for those engaged in illegal fishing. “They say they have no choice, they have to feed their children. That’s lame. I know. I’ve been there.”

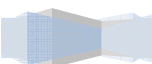
But he agrees: It is all about the children. When a former employer asked him to establish a marijuana plantation, he quickly turned his back on his lavish lifestyle in the underworld. “Why? I was married then, with one child, and that hit me. What kind of life am I giving my kid? I had to say no.”

He would eventually say no to illegal fishing as well.

“I rationalized illegal fishing like any illegal fisher: I have to feed my family, etc. Then one day I realized that the sea was in a terrible shape and fishers were getting poorer because of illegal fishing. That got me thinking: Is this the future I want for my children?”

Trapero believes fisheries can recover, but it will take a long time. “There’s still so much destruction going on,” he says.

He finds a glimmer of hope in conservation initiatives such as the USAID FISH Project-assisted Siete Pecados Marine Park in Coron, Palawan, Philippines. “The park is always well-protected, so the resources have really flourished,” he says, then adds, “I’d be more hopeful if we can have more programs like it and if authorities would seriously run after illegal fishing financiers and their protectors.” (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 1/12/10)



Delivering a Mandate for a Healthy Sea



(Photo: A. Sia)

Village chief Yuri Palanca takes a hands-on approach to the government mandate to manage and protect the sea.

Among government officials in Coron town, Palawan in western Philippines, Bintuan village chief Yuri Palanca is one of the better known proponents of marine conservation.

Taking a hands-on approach, Palanca closely administers the management of Bintuan's 65-hectare Decalve Marine Park. He has attended numerous workshops and seminars organized by the USAID FISH Project, which assisted the park. Faced with opposition from certain stakeholders who were unhappy with new restrictions, he convened consultation meetings, joined patrol operations and personally talked to critics to convince them to support the initiative.

He has also worked out an arrangement with a pearl farm located at Decalve to settle resource use conflicts between fishers and the farm. "The farm used to be totally off limits to fishing; now there are designated areas there where fishers can operate. What's more, the farm's guards help us secure the park," he relates.

By February 2008, a user fee system installed at Decalve in 2006 had generated for the village more than Php300,000 in diving and snorkeling fees, Palanca claims. He notes, "In the beginning, we had a hard time convincing some stakeholders to support Decalve, but eventually the park's success became the biggest selling point for marine conservation. When we proposed a second marine park, everyone quickly came on board."

"Of course I would have pushed it either way, as hard as I did the Decalve park," Palanca maintains. "We are not in government to win popularity contests. The management of our marine resources is a mandate that I am sworn to deliver. It is something that I must do, whether it makes me popular or not." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 1/12/10)

Addressing the Population-Environment Link



(Photo: A. Sia)

Municipal midwife Glen Trapero says family planning is well-accepted in fishing villages where reproductive health education has been implemented.

One of the key factors contributing to the decline of fish stocks in the Philippines has been the rapid increase in the number of people dependent on fishery resources. The 2002 Philippine Census on Fisheries counted nearly 1.8 million fishers, three times the number recorded in 1980.

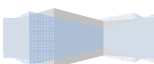
To address this problem, the USAID FISH Project encouraged the integration of reproductive health and population programs in local development plans, which have been adopted at the village level in some Project sites.

Part of the strategy was to train community-based “peer educators” to help promote reproductive health in their respective villages.

Glen Trapero, a midwife working with the Coron government in Palawan, says the strategy has worked well.

“The peer educators helped us spread the practice of family planning in their communities,” he says. “Since we started this program over six years ago, many people in the areas where our peer educators work have opted to have fewer children. This has helped contain any additional pressure on our dwindling fishery resources.”

Trapero adds, “Our message has resounded well especially among fishing families because they experienced a significant decline in fish catch at a time when the fishing population was experiencing explosive growth. They’re quick to see the connection: Smaller families translate to fewer people putting pressure on the sea, which means the sea will be healthier and therefore able to support healthier families.” (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 01/04/10)



Marine Sanctuary Gets Presidential Attention

President's visit boosts community support for conservation



President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (wearing blue hat) leads launching of the Decalve Strict Protection Zone in Palawan, Philippines.

The influx of appreciative visitors serves to continuously reaffirm local efforts to protect the marine park.

Initiative

The Decalve Strict Protection Zone is by far the most important zone for the pursuit of the biological conservation objectives of the Bintuan-Sangat Marine Park. To underscore this point, a “high-profile” launching was held on May 9, 2005. A-list guests led by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and US Ambassador Francis Ricciardone graced the event, along with the provincial governor and mayors of the municipalities comprising the Calamianes Group of Islands.

Results

The presence of very important dignitaries at the Park’s launching changed the way many locals regarded the Park and their role in its management. In an instant, the Park and local efforts to protect it became a source of local pride, and everyone wanted a part in it. An MPA Management Board now oversees the Park, employing a decision-making process that is participatory and encourages the involvement of as wide a cross-section of stakeholders as possible. This has helped deepen community understanding of the Park’s importance, and the increasing number of visitors serves to continuously reaffirm local efforts to protect it. With help from USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest Project, the Park now has a monitoring station equipped with a patrol boat, and a user fee system has been installed, generating revenues that help defray maintenance costs. Meanwhile, fishers have begun to see an increase in their fish catch, a development that they equate with effective Park management. (R Cabungcal, FISH Project, 11.17.06)

Challenge

In 2005, when a Strict Protection Zone was declared in Bintuan-Sangat Marine Park in Calamianes, Palawan, Philippines, stakeholders had mixed reactions. Some were supportive, others were indifferent, and a great number were downright hostile. The 64-ha reef area that makes up the Decalve Protection Zone is a dive spot widely known not only for its coral reefs but also for the presence of a number of sunken WWII Japanese ships. Those who supported it said it was a much needed step to protect a precious resource from activities that had already devastated reef resources nearby. Those opposed to it worried that “protection” would mean loss of access to a productive fishing ground.

Marine Park Improves Resource Management

Community takes the lead in restoring degraded coastal habitats



Siete Picados Marine Park, Coron, Palawan, Philippines

The establishment of the marine park has opened people's eyes to the benefits of habitat protection.

Challenge

The Philippines' Calamianes Group of Islands, to which the town of Coron belongs, harbors an ecosystem made up of diverse and ecologically important marine habitats that support the growth of the local economy through their broad range of resources and services. These productive but fragile habitats have long been subjected to destructive human activities and, as a result, are seriously degraded. In particular, fisheries in the area have declined, affecting the livelihoods and quality of life of thousands of fishing families in the area.

Initiative

The local government of Coron adopted marine protected areas (MPA) as a key strategy to help conserve important coastal ecosystems and sustain the viability of its local fisheries and coastal tourism.

In the case of the Siete Picados Marine Park, their main consideration was the need to protect the remaining coral reef areas as focal conservation points for genetic diversity, replenishment of fish population and promotion of responsible ecotourism.

The Park started as an initial activity of the Sustainable Environmental Program (SEMP) using community-based co-management approaches, and became fully functional with technical assistance from USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project. Responding to a request from community leaders, the FISH Project strengthened local capacities in MPA management by encouraging local managers to devise their own "homegrown", innovative management practices.

Results

The community's work has been rewarded by the official declaration of the Siete Picados Marine Park through municipal ordinance. The park is managed by the MPA Management Board with assistance from the village council. The Board has installed a user-fee system to allow the increasing number of visitors not only to enjoy the park's attractions but also to contribute to local efforts to protect it. Proceeds are used to support a wide variety of activities aimed at sustaining park management. Although the Board has employed a Park Ranger to serve as MPA guard and tour guide, the community is still fully involved in the park's operations. Local official Ed Tuguay says, "This MPA is ours, and we should give our best not only for our benefit but for the benefit of the next generation." (R Cabungcal, FISH Project, 12.14.06)

Doing Their Share for the Sea



(Photo: A. Sia)

Mario Avocado (left) and Annabella Quindoza explain their group’s mission. “We share the same goal, to restore the sea to what it used to be,” says Avocado.

An organization of micro-entrepreneurs is spearheading a mangrove rehabilitation initiative in Coron town in Palawan, Philippines. Calling themselves “Tarabiangang sa Barangay 5” (Cooperation for Village 5), the group was formed primarily to push an environmental and livelihood agenda.

“Right now, we’re focused on coastal resource management, particularly mangrove rehabilitation. We have planted more than 1000 mangrove seedlings along a 1 km stretch of our coastline, covering an area of about 1 hectare,” says Annabella Quindoza, the group’s advisor.

Tarabiangang members include fishers, fish vendors, producers of dried fish, and cashew producers and sellers, many of them from indigenous communities.

“We’re not all fishers, but we all share the same goal, to restore the sea to what it used to be,” says Tarabiangang president Mario Avocado.

Both Quindoza and Avocado have seen the rapid decline of Coron’s coastal resources, especially in the last decade. “In the past we did not have electricity, motor vehicles, paved roads or any of the modern conveniences that we now have, but life was easy. We had pure air, healthy forests and clean seas, and we never lacked food,” says Quindoza.

“We do what we can and hope others will do their share too,” adds Avocado. “We all want to get back at least some of what we’ve lost. If we stay focused on our common goal, surely we can make it.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/05/10)

Banking on Community Cooperation



(Photo:A. Sia)

Romeo Enero finds important allies among fishers and community leaders in his fight against illegal fishing.

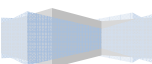
As chair of the municipal fisheries and aquatic resource management council (MFARMC) of Coron in the western Philippine province of Palawan, Romeo Enero takes pride in how the various village councils in his town have responded to the call to help in the effort to manage and protect their coastal resources.

“Support from the local government has not been consistent, so I am happy to see our fishing communities, led by their village-level fisheries and aquatic resource management councils, cooperating with us,” Enero says.

Although at first resentful of the stricter enforcement of fishery laws and the introduction of new regulations, a growing number of Coron’s small fishers are now at the forefront of coastal resource and fisheries management.

With training, enforcement and information-education-communication support from the USAID FISH Project, these fishers help in the management of the town’s several marine protected areas, as well as in the enforcement of fishery laws.

The benefits of nearly five years of resource protection and management are evident in higher fish yields, which have only encouraged more fishers to support the cause. Says Enero, “Although the fishing communities are still not 100 percent behind us, there are fewer illegal fishers now than when we started and more fishers are supporting us, including a good number that actively help fight illegal fishing.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/06/10)



Standing Up for a Sustainable Future

Indigenous community takes charge of their sea



(Photo: A. Sia)

Viola Agondes, with fellow tribesfolk Job (middle) and Bienvenido (right) Paguia, leads her community's campaign to protect the sea.

With support from the USAID FISH Project, a Tagbanua community in Coron, Palawan is gaining ground in restoring the productivity of its sea.

The Tagbanuas are the original inhabitants of Palawan province and one of the oldest tribes in the Philippines.

“We have managed to control cyanide fishing since we began protecting our sea,” reports Viola Agondes, who heads a people’s organization tasked to manage a fish sanctuary near the village. “There are now obvious changes in the condition of our fishery resources. The fish are bigger, the corals are healthier. Our effort to protect the sea is benefiting our community in many ways.”

Seaweed farmers Job and Bienvenido Paguia agree, “Cyanide fishing harmed our seaweeds. Now that it’s almost totally gone, our harvests have improved tremendously.”

For Agondes, the most significant benefit has come in the way the community itself has changed. Much of the Tagbanuas’ traditional beliefs have been lost with the influx and eventual dominance of migrants from other parts of the country. Now, having embraced the responsibility to care for the sea, they are reminded of their elders’ teachings. “I remember what my grandmother had told me. She said you can get more than your share from the sea once and it will let you do it for a second time. But the third time around, you will get nothing. Our sea may be generous, but misfortune befalls those who abuse it.”

It is a lesson the community is trying to live by. “We used to care only about putting food on the table,” says Agondes. “Now we also want to ensure that our resources are sustained through the next generations. We are willing to stand up for a sustainable future. Outsiders have come to respect us for this.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/04/10)

Seeking a Balance in Meeting Fishers' Needs

Town tackles fishery production, conservation and social equity issues



(Photo:A. Sia)

“Small fishers know that we are here to protect their rights,” says government officer Arnel Alcantara.

The biggest challenge facing fisheries managers in the Philippines today lies not only in conserving what is inarguably a diminishing resource on which millions of people depend for food and livelihood. It also involves addressing social equity issues between the different sectors with legitimate interests in the resource.

“It’s not all about rehabilitating or conserving our fisheries or even increasing production. There’s also the question of who ultimately benefits from the fisheries,” says Arnel Alcantara, the municipal agriculturist of Culion, Palawan, Philippines, in charge of the town’s agriculture and fisheries sectors.

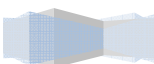
Social equity is a critical issue for fishing communities in the country. In Culion, the presence of more advantaged marine-based and other business concerns that directly compete with small fishers has made social equity a particularly ticklish issue for Alcantara.

“It was very difficult when we started,” he relates. “First of all, we had to adequately respond to the small fisher’s typical argument: Are we going to starve the family this year so we will have more fish next year?”

The presence of pearl farms and tourist establishments in the waters of Culion made small fishers leery of the government’s intentions. “From a purely conservation point of view, their presence has been beneficial, because they help protect our resource base,” says Alcantara. “But the fact that they were allowed to deny small fishers access to their areas put government in a bad light. Many people said we favored the pearl farms over the small fishers’ interests.”

Supported by the USAID FISH Project, which encouraged a highly participatory resource management process, Alcantara and his staff promoted good fishing through the enforcement of fishery laws and information-education-communication. Simultaneously, they secured the commitment of the big operators, specifically the pearl farms, to allow fishers access to once restricted areas. “As long as fishers follow certain rules and not engage in illegal fishing, they can now operate inside pearl farm waters,” Alcantara avers.

“We’re making progress,” he adds. “Because of the work the FISH Project started in 2004, our municipal government and fishing communities have taken interest in conservation. An increasing number of people now understand better the issue of sustainable fishing and are more willing to cooperate with us. The small fishers have become among our strongest allies. They now know that, as long as they abide by the law, we are always here to protect their rights.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/06/10)



Working Toward a New Time of Plenty for Fisheries

Measures installed to help sustain resource management effort



(Photo:A. Sia)

“There are many reasons to expect better days ahead for our fishers,” says Francisco Espina.

Francisco Espina is not native born to his hometown of Culion. He was drawn more than 40 years ago to what was then a Department of Health-administered leper colony by the area’s rich fisheries.

Culion, which is part of a group of islands called Calamianes in northern Palawan, Philippines, is known for its diverse and productive fisheries. In the late 1960s when Espina set up his fish trading business there, the best fish sold for no more than Php2 a kilo.

“The place was teeming with fish then,” relates Espina. “In fact, we have an island here that got its name from the smell of rotting fish. Back in the day, trawlers and other fishers were catching too many fish that they needed to dump excess catch somewhere. And so they did – they must have dumped tons of fish on the island that just rotted there.”

Over the years, more and more fishers flocked to Culion. The use of trawls and other efficient but destructive fishing methods became prevalent, and local fisheries declined gradually. “Fishers began to feel the decline only in the 1990s, but even then, not fully comprehending the situation, they simply shifted to even more efficient, and often more destructive, gear.” Through the years, Espina had left the business, joined the ministry, and then entered politics.

The fisheries have yet to fully recover, but Espina, now a third-term municipal councilor, is hopeful the decline has been reversed. “We are grateful for the intervention of the USAID FISH Project, which showed us that the situation was critical and needed to be addressed urgently,” he says. “With the Project’s help, municipal personnel and fishing communities were trained and educated in the ways of sustainable fisheries.”

“I’m confident that this effort to restore our fisheries will continue beyond the terms of the political leaders that initiated or advocated it,” Espina adds. “Thanks to the FISH Project, we have the necessary skills and commitment in government, willing allies and champions among our fishers, and an integrated fisheries code to guide our leaders well into the future. There is much left to do, but there are also many reasons to expect better days ahead for our fishers. We may even approximate those past years of bounty harvests, without of course the destructive fishing.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/07/10)

Steering a Village to Sustainable Fisheries



(Photo: A. Sia)

Alito Ejares points out a no-fishing area at his village: “If we allow open access to continue, we’ll have nothing left to fish.”

Alito Ejares supports the implementation of fishing controls in his village. “It is not the most popular thing for a politician like me to do, but it is essential that we regulate the kind and quantity of fish harvested from the sea, and the manner that those fish are harvested,” he says.

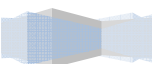
Ejares is the elected leader of Libis village in Culion, Palawan, Philippines. He is a fisherman, so he has seen firsthand how severely fisheries in the area have declined, largely due to habitat destruction and overfishing brought on by various forms of destructive fishing.

Ejares relates, “I used to catch a basketful of yellow tail fusilier a day, but my catch got smaller over time. Three years ago, the average fish catch in our village was only about 1 kg.”

Assisted by the USAID FISH Project, the Culion government declared nearly 100 hectares of Libis waters as a protected area. Says Ejares, “It took 2 years before we saw fish yields begin to improve, but now our fishers can catch as much as 10kg of fish. They’re not supposed to though, because we have a ceiling of 3kg per fisher per day. We also have a closed season for live food fish.”

“Controls are necessary. If we allow open access to continue, we’ll have nothing left to fish,” Ejares adds. “Some fishers complain about the new restrictions. That’s fine – in time they will see that this is for their own good. Many fishers used to complain about the no-fishing policy in our protected area too. Now they’re happy about it.”

Ejares knows well that the change process is not easy but vows to take it as far as he can. “I’d like to be remembered as the one who steered our village toward sustainable fisheries,” he says. (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/06/10)



Selling Conservation as a Citizen's Duty



(Photo: A. Sia)

As the elected leader of his village, Eduardo Layag is using his authority to promote sea stewardship as every citizen's duty.

Keeping the sea healthy is not only the fishers' concern; it is everybody's duty. This is the message that Eduardo Layag is putting across to his constituents in Balala.

Balala, a small coastal village in Culion town, Palawan in western Philippines, has a relatively small population of fishers. "We're mostly government workers, teachers and nurses that live here," Layag says.

Like virtually everywhere in the country, fish yields in Balala have declined severely compared to some 10 years ago. "Because fishing is not our primary occupation, we are not much impacted economically, although people do complain about the rising prices of fish," Layag observes.

"But in other ways we are affected. Our sea is not as clean and healthy as it used to be, and this impairs our quality of life."

Supported by the USAID FISH Project, the government has taken steps to address critical coastal issues. "Illegal fishing perpetrated mostly by outsiders was a major contributor to the decline of our fisheries, and we are putting a stop to that," says Layag. "We also manage a community-based fish sanctuary at a small islet under our jurisdiction, where most of our fisher residents live. After several years of protection, the area is showing signs of recovery in terms of coral growth and fishery productivity."

Still, much more can be done, and not just by fishers. "Pollution has become a major and still growing problem for us, one that we cannot blame solely on the fishers," Layag points out. "We're all in this together. I encourage people to do their citizen's duty and I, as an elected official, will continue to fulfil my duty to enforce the law." (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 01/06/10)

Keeping a Watchful Eye on His Hometown



(Photo: A. Sia)

Now retired from politics, three-term municipal councilor Glen Lisboa remains hopeful about his hometown's prospects for fisheries management.

Former municipal councilor Glen Lisboa was among the first elected officials of Culion when it became a municipality in 1998.

Culion is part of a group of islands in northern Palawan, Philippines called Calamianes. Prior to its becoming a full-fledged town, it was a leper colony administered by the Department of Health.

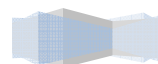
"We had a rough start building an entire government unit practically from zero," Lisboa relates.

But he knew even then that fisheries would be a major focus of his legislative agenda.

"Illegal fishing was rampant in our waters. In fact, in many cases, it was practically the norm. When we tried to exercise our authority under the Philippine fisheries code, we were met with open defiance. Fishers said nobody paid them much heed before, and suddenly there we were, telling them what not to do."

Training and information-education-communication support from the USAID FISH Project beginning 2004 helped increase community acceptance of fishery law enforcement and other resource protection measures. "The Project also convinced us to establish fish sanctuaries, which was a good start," says Lisboa. "Because of the sanctuaries, more people learned to appreciate the value of protection."

In 2007, after three terms as municipal councilor, Lisboa retired from politics. He now works as a teacher in another province but keeps a close eye on his hometown. "I'm banking on others to continue what we have started," he says. "I'm hopeful they will, because I know they realize that fisheries conservation will benefit them in the long run." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/06/10)



Putting Small Fishers First



(Photo: A. Sia)

Geronimo Gevela (left) and Carlito Lopez work together to promote small fishers' welfare.

The depletion of fishery resources often hits small fishers the hardest. Geronimo Gevela and Carlito Lopez are well aware of this fact and have joined forces to help alleviate the plight of small fishers.

Gevela and Lopez work in Coron, Palawan in western Philippines – Gevela as the Office of the Provincial Agriculture's coordinator for Coron and Lopez as agriculture technologist.

“Our offices have very limited funds, so we work together in order to stretch our resources,” says Gevela. “The small fishing sector is our main priority, even if it is not always on top of the local government's budget agenda. The small fishers' welfare is our primary concern.”

Adds Lopez, “To succeed, we must work with members of the fishing communities themselves, although it has not been easy to get them to work with us.”

Coron is the hub of the live food fish trade in the Philippines, notorious for its use of cyanide to collect live fish. Like most fishing grounds in the Philippines, it is significantly depleted by excessive and destructive fishing. “To help fishers, we must stop bad fishing, so we're not the most popular guys in town, certainly not among illegal fishers, some of whom are quite influential,” says Lopez.

Assisted by the USAID FISH Project, the two offices engaged small fishing communities in fisheries management through training, consultations and information-education-communication. At the same time, Gevela's office promoted seaweed farming in some villages, creating pockets of successful seaweed entrepreneurs that eventually became their allies in fisheries management.

“Cyanide stunts seaweed growth, so seaweed operators are particularly vigilant against cyanide fishing,” notes Gevela. “Perhaps our political leaders could be more supportive, but with the communities' support, we're making slow but sure progress. One day our fishery resources will fully recover and benefit the small fishers first. That would be good enough reward for us.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/05/10)

Fighting a Scourge of the Sea

Government installs measures to regulate live fish trade



(Photo: A. Sia)

The challenge remains daunting, Elsa Cruz says, showing a bag of sodium cyanide seized from a live fish operator.

In 1999, when Elsa Cruz first heard that she would be sent to Coron, Palawan to set up and head a fisheries station there, she knew that a tough challenge awaited her. It turned out to be a protracted battle that continues to this day, but following recent measures taken by government to address key problems, Cruz is hopeful about its eventual outcome.

Coron is part of the Calamianes Group of Islands, the center of the live food fish trade in the Philippines. With gross receipts of well over Php200 million, the trade has spawned an industry that supports about 1,000 fishers.

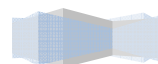
But it has also contributed significantly to the decline of the area's fishery resources, caused mainly by destructive collection methods, including the illegal use of cyanide and overharvesting of target species.

Cruz, who works with the fisheries bureau, relates, "It was a real struggle in the beginning. No regulation was in place. Fishers operated at will, often illegally. They naturally resisted our efforts to enforce the law."

Now the fishers have become less recalcitrant, Cruz notes. "They are less likely to challenge our authority. The local governments have also become more active in law enforcement, and have even adopted new regulations. With assistance from the USAID's FISH Project, they have implemented information and education campaigns targeted at fishing communities, and have intensified the registration of fishers and fishing boats. One town has even adopted a closed season for live fish collection."

The challenge remains daunting, admits Cruz. "We must be more consistent in the enforcement of the law, and we must continue educating people," she says. "Everybody must help out in order to make this work – the various agencies of government and the fishers themselves."

"I am hopeful because I have seen positive changes," she adds. "Local, provincial and national agencies have installed some critical measures to address resource decline. What's more, many fishers have a better understanding of the issues. They have seen how much their catch has declined, they know what caused the decline, and hopefully they will do what it takes to correct it." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 01/04/10)



Mayor Promises 'Zero Illegal Fishing'



(Photo: Bien Unido LGU)

When he campaigned as a neophyte candidate in the 2007 local elections, Bien Unido Mayor Nino Rey Boniel had a first good look at the fisheries situation in his hometown in the central Philippine province of Bohol. “Illegal fishing has always been a problem for us, but what I saw told me it had gotten worse,” he says. “Right then I wanted to do something about it.”

After consulting with the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, Boniel adopted a strategy that combines hard and soft approaches to law enforcement.

“We do as much hard enforcement as we can, within our very limited resources,” he says. “At the same time, we try to talk the illegal fishers out of the business. Almost every Sunday, I hold a dialogue with communities that are known to support illegal fishers.”

Boniel talks to fishing families: “We want voluntary compliance. If that does not happen, we will apply the full force of the law.”

Bien Unido has long been known as a haven for Danish seine and trawl operators, many of whom reside on two small islands off the mainland, the focus of Boniel's campaign. Introduced by the fisheries bureau a few decades ago, both gears are now outlawed in municipal waters.

He used to sympathize with the operators, “just a little,” Boniel says. “They told me they were just trying to earn a living, send their children to school, live decent lives – all legitimate motives. But now I understand the situation better: We have a minority of fishers that's robbing others of their livelihood. It's simply unacceptable.”

Boniel says he wants to see voluntary compliance, but if it does not happen, he promises to use the full force of the law. “In 2007, we told the operators they had two years to phase out their illegal practice. Many have complied, so I can say illegal fishing is significantly reduced. By the end of this year, 2008, we will have zero illegal fishing,” he declares. (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/30/08)

Fishers Rediscover Sea-Friendly Gears

Marine protection nets higher fish yields, incomes for fishers



Photo: B. Cabrera, FISH Project

Anter Baculao (left), on sea patrol with fellow fish warden Ben Abatos (foreground), sees his village changing for the better: “I used to be the only gillnet fisher here. Now even blast fishers have switched to gillnet.”

Antero “Anter” Baculao is enjoying his best year as a fisher at Danajon Bank, Bohol in central Philippines.

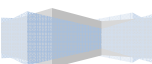
“I have been fishing for 20 years, and for the first time this year I caught about 30 kilos of barracuda in one fishing trip. I used to catch only mackerels. Now I also catch jacks, barracudas and other fishes.”

Anter believes much of his “luck” comes from the presence of a marine protected area (MPA) near where he usually fishes. He is one of about 110 fishers on Bilang-bilangan East, a densely populated island 15 kms from mainland Bohol. The island used to have “sona,” an area closed to fishing except during the week before the island’s *fiesta*, when the area was blasted for a fee of Php12,000. The practice was stopped in 1998 when the community organized a fisherman’s association, but years of blast fishing and overfishing had taken their toll on the island’s marine life -- the 45-hectare MPA was set up in 2002 to help restore the natural productivity of the area.

With assistance from the USAID Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, the island now has one of the best managed MPAs in Danajon Bank. Anter and many of his fellow fishers have been trained in reef assessment, law enforcement, and other skills needed to effectively manage the MPA, and have cast away blast fishing and fine-mesh net for sea-friendly gears.

They are reaping the benefits. “Since the MPA was established, I have never come home from a fishing trip empty-handed,” Anter, now a gillnet fisher, says. “In a good week I can earn Php10,000.”

The reward is more than economic. Ben Abatos, who heads the MPA Management Council, swears he feels younger at 63 because of the MPA. “It feels good just being there, watching the fishes,” he says. (B Cabrera, FISH Project, 10.03.07)



A Blast Fisher's Requital



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

Once a blast fisher, Rico Cruz has become a staunch enemy of illegal fishing.

Rico Cruz was once a blast fisher, albeit only briefly. Now he leads an organization that manages a marine sanctuary in President Carlos P. Garcia, Bohol, Philippines.

One of 18 children of a blast fisher, Cruz, now 48, became a blast fisher in 1988, when he was in his late 20s. “My father never taught me to do blast fishing – he said it was too dangerous,” Cruz relates. “But in 1988, traders came to our village, offering Php3,000-5,000 to buy fish wholesale. I was a net fisher then and didn’t catch enough fish to meet the traders’ volume requirements, so I asked a neighbor to show me how to use dynamite.”

His five-month foray into blast fishing ended in disaster, costing him chunks of the fingers on his right hand.

“I accepted what happened to me, because I used dynamite knowing fully that it would compromise my own physical safety,” he says. “I didn’t see that it also put our community’s economic well-being in jeopardy.”

When the municipal government established a marine sanctuary at his village, Cruz was one of several fishers invited to train with the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project. He finally saw the bigger harm caused by dynamite fishing to the environment and society.

Cruz has since been elected chairman of the fishers’ organization tasked to manage the sanctuary – and he has become a staunch enemy of illegal fishing. “We will not allow illegal fishing ever again,” he vows. “If we do, it could kill us.” (*A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/27/08*)

Illegal Fishing Drive Gains Allies

Local government is key to good enforcement



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

“People expect us to bring illegal fishers to justice,” says police officer Leo Aumentado.

Leo Aumentado has spent nearly 20 years in the police force, and he has been running after illegal fishers for more than three-quarters of that time. It is a risky job, but at least in the island municipality of Carlos P. Garcia (CPG) in Bohol, Philippines where he is stationed, enforcers like him get a sense of security from having adequate political backing.

“Local government support is key,” says Aumentado. “Without it, we would not get anywhere in our campaign to stop illegal fishing.”

That certainly was not the case when Aumentado was first assigned to CPG in 1992.

“Local government was not as involved or as serious about enforcement as they are now,” he recalls. “Illegal fishers, when they did get caught, were usually given only a slap on the wrist, which just emboldened them to repeatedly violate the law, and even threaten us.”

There were reasons for the local government's apparent lack of interest in the illegal fishing problem. “Some local officials were themselves engaged in illegal fishing, and a few were on the big fishing operators' payroll,” says Aumentado. But mostly, it was because local officials had yet to fully understand to their new role under a decentralized political set-up introduced just the year before through the 1991 Local Government Code (LGC). The LGC gave local governments the mandate to manage municipal fisheries, and the Philippine Fisheries Code passed in 1998 defined that mandate more fully.

Technical assistance provided by the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project in 2005-2006 allowed the local government to put more teeth into their anti-illegal fishing drive. FISH encouraged local officials to invest more in law enforcement and the training of enforcers. “Through FISH, we learned to use information, education and communication strategies in our campaign,” says Aumentado. “We talked to the fishers, listened to their concerns, told them what was legal and what was not, and then we increased police visibility in our municipal waters.”

In one year, Aumentado, who describes the campaign as a 'personal crusade,' noted a sharp drop in illegal fishing in CPG, and a significant increase in catch by hook-and-line fishing. “Now we have more allies than enemies, people who come forward to report illegal fishing,” he says. “There's a sense of comfort in having more people on our side, but there's also more pressure. Now people expect us, the police, to catch the illegal fishers and bring them to justice... As they should.” (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/27/08)

Town Improves Prospects for Sustainable Fisheries

Long-term institutional remedies adopted to reverse fish decline



(Photo: A. Sia/FISH Project)
Nestor Cruda (right) will head the proposed environment and natural resources office of Talibon, Bohol.

“I have high hopes,” says Cruda. “If we stay on track, this is one program we can and will sustain.”

“Now, with FISH, we created an office tasked with CRM, and assigned people to focus on coastal and fisheries concerns,” he says. “We have a plan, we have ordinances, and we have a regular budget to implement the program.”

FISH, a 7-year project that started in 2003, is designed to build local government capacity for managing coastal resources, particularly fisheries. Talibon is one of four municipalities in Bohol that are the focus of Project assistance, and one of 11 Bohol towns with jurisdiction over a naturally rich but now largely depleted double barrier reef. Decades of destructive fishing have destroyed much of the reef and its fishery resources. A FISH Project survey in 2004 revealed fish stocks had declined to critical levels, severely affecting the area’s large fishing population.

Talibon responded to FISH’s call to action initially by organizing a coastal law enforcement team, and subsequently by instituting systemic reforms aimed at enabling the local government to remedy the decline of local fisheries as well as other CRM issues.

“We’ve been at this for five years, and we’re happy with the results,” says Cruda. “Even fishers who used to resist our anti-illegal fishing drive are now willingly helping us enforce the law. They come to our office to register and get their fishing licenses, and they happily pay all the fees. They think it’s worth it, now that fish stocks have improved and they’re catching more fish. Institutionally, we are taking important steps to equip ourselves so we can manage our coastal resources for the long haul. If we stay on track, this is one program we can and will sustain.” (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/18/08)

After more than 25 years in government, Nestor Cruda has seen many externally funded projects come and go. Few of the programs introduced by these projects lasted after the projects ended, but Cruda --recently designated head of the proposed environment and natural resources office of Talibon town in central Philippines -- has high hopes for the coastal resource management (CRM) program that his municipal government is currently implementing with help from the USAID Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project.

“What we did in the past was simply to go along with what the projects were doing. We had no budget earmarked specifically for their programs, we had no long-term plan to implement specifically those programs, and we did not have the right systems in place to run those programs,” Cruda relates.

(Former) Rebel with a Cause

Training 'arms' enforcer to fight illegal fishing



(Photo: J Unson/FISH Project)

“Law enforcement is a crusade for equity,” says coastal law enforcer Ruel Ramirez (right).

Ruel Ramirez was a child soldier, recruited when he was only 14 years old to the New People’s Army, the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. At 19, he was captured by government forces, doing jail time until he was granted amnesty four years later. Now 38, he is working with government, showing a dedication worthy of a true believer as he leads his town’s campaign against illegal fishing.

Ramirez was assigned in 2004 to head the coastal law enforcement team of Talibon, Bohol in central Philippines. Illegal fishing was rampant then, encouraged by the near absence of sea patrols in the area.

“The mayor saw the urgent need to address the fisheries situation. But he had just assumed office, and wasn’t confident on the cooperation he’d get from those already in the service.” Ramirez relates. “I on the other hand didn’t know much about law enforcement, but I had served the mayor for many years. He knew my work ethic. Given a job, I’d try to do it well.”

Unsure about the loyalty of the local police, Ramirez formed a small ragtag army consisting of volunteers from the town market’s cleaning crew. “The mayor gave us some money for fuel but that was all we really had,” he says. “For several months, we patrolled the sea in a borrowed boat. We were badly in need of training and equipment. We’d often get the runaround from illegal fishers, but we pushed on.”

In 2005, Ramirez and his team joined a series of trainings for coastal law enforcers conducted by the USAID Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project. With the Project’s encouragement, the team was formally reconstituted to include the police, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources and municipal fisheries personnel, as well as volunteers. It was given a regular budget, patrol boats, radios and other operational needs. Within a year, the illegal fishers were largely neutralized, drawing favor for the team from law-abiding small fishery stakeholders.

Ramirez himself has found his work’s true value. “At first, for me, this was really just another job,” he says. “Then I met a fisher, teary-eyed because his fish trap had been trampled by trawlers – he’d bought it with borrowed money, which he still had to repay. I met many more like him. saw their anguish, felt their helplessness, and I realized law enforcement is not ‘just another job,’ but a crusade for justice and equity.” (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/18/08)

Mayor Puts Conservation First

Interpretive center, environment office address key issues



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

“There’s plenty to do, but we’re making progress,” says Mayor Juanario Item.

Juanario Item decided early in life that a job in government would be his ticket to a stable future. Now he is mayor, facing up to his responsibility to promote a sustainable future for the largely coastal population of Talibon, Bohol, Philippines, through coastal resource management (CRM).

As a child, Item wanted to become a lawyer and “work in town hall.” But his father died before he got to university, so he worked as a janitor to support himself through college, became a teacher and later enlisted in the police force. Even so, he never forgot his dream. On a visit to his hometown, he joined a fishing expedition and witnessed firsthand the havoc left in the sea by destructive fishing. He vowed he would become mayor and do something about it.

In 1994, Item won his first mayoral term and quickly launched a campaign against illegal fishing. “The local government earned Php1 million from penalties alone in my first year as mayor. In the second year, we had rid our waters of almost all illegal fishing,” he recalls. He won another term, then decided to run for a seat in the provincial council, which he lost. Three years later, in the next election, Item regained the mayoral seat. To his dismay, the illegal fishers had made a comeback, once more lording the waters of Talibon. “I had to start all over,” he says.

This time, made wiser by experience, he also had program sustainability in mind. With help from the USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, he organized and trained a coastal law enforcement team, and sought his council’s approval of a CRM ordinance that would allocate a regular budget for CRM.

Also with FISH’s assistance, Item led the institutionalization process that would install CRM as a mainstay program of local government. An environment office tasked with CRM is now operational, and national government approval for its permanent staffing is expected soon. In hopes of generating wider community support for his advocacy, the mayor initiated the Talibon Fisheries and CRM Interpretive Center, which serves as his government’s information and education hub for coastal concerns.

“I don’t think people really appreciated what I tried to do before, but they do now,” he says. “There’s plenty to do, but we’re making progress.” (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/20/08)

Harnessing Woman Power



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

Virginia Item is confident in the capacity of her all-woman cooperative as a change agent.

By Virginia Item's reckoning, the women in the island communities of Talibon are a fairly empowered lot. They generally hold their family's purse strings, and have a say on how their fisher-husbands' incomes are spent.

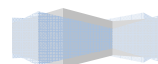
But, observes Item, many women urgently need guidance on how to manage time and money. "Of course, they're engaged in productive pursuits. Some help sell their husbands' catch, others have their own businesses, and most take care of the house chores," she says. "But then, when their work is done, many waste their time and money on gambling and drinking."

Item, a member of the municipal council in this coastal town in the central Philippine province of Bohol, has organized a women's cooperative to encourage the island women to make productive use of their time.

Members are taught handicraft and other potential money-making skills, while leaders manage the cooperative's finances and growing business.

Item is optimistic about the cooperative's prospects. "We've increased our capital, diversified our activities, and improved the quality of life of some families," she says. Encouraged by the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, they have also become involved in the local government's environmental advocacy activities through the FISH-assisted Talibon Fisheries and Coastal Resource Management Interpretive Center.

"Right now, we represent only a small fraction of our womenfolk. But give us time: We will be a significant change agent," Item declares. (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/26/08)



Learning through the Arts



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

After the local government of Talibon in Bohol, Philippines intensified coastal law enforcement, they made a disturbing discovery: Children, some as young as 10, engaged in illegal fishing. When caught, the young offenders denied adult participation or instigation, so law enforcers could not assign criminal liability. (Under Philippine law, children aged 15 years and below are exempted from criminal responsibility; the law likewise exempts child offenders older than 15 but below 18 years old, unless they have acted “with discernment.”)

With help from the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, Talibon established a fisheries and coastal resource management interpretive center that would spearhead an education campaign aimed specifically at the youth sector. Among its strategies was the use of theater to instill conservation values in young learners.

Calituban Island's community theater group portrays the evils of blast fishing.

Assisted by FISH and local theater talents, the center has formed a community theater group on Calituban Island, a known haven for blast fishers. A number of young, out-of-school illegal fishers joined students in a theater workshop that created a musical play that delved into the evils of blast fishing. They regaled the workshop with their “sea smarts,” but they also gained a valuable life lesson.

“We will never get involved in illegal fishing again,” they declare. “It’s destructive, and it’s wrong.” (A Sia/FISH Project, 12/01/08)

Conservation Gets the Vote

Resource management gains help local execs win elections



(Photo: FISH Project)
Alpios Delima (right) has served under two mayors supportive of coastal resource management

Now that people know the program's benefits, "they wouldn't give it up," says Delima.

Not long ago, few politicians pushed for the strict implementation of resource management programs during an election year. In particular, many regarded the enforcement of coastal and fisheries laws as political suicide because it was seen as “unfavorable” to fishing communities. But in Ubay town, Bohol, Philippines, local officials now believe voters would actively oppose anyone who proposed a return to the old days, when illegal fishers lorded the sea.

“People now know the benefits of CRM (coastal resource management),” says CRM coordinator Alpios Delima. “It's not just awareness, it's actual experience with CRM – they've seen and shared in its benefits. They wouldn't give it up.”

Delima has been involved in Ubay's CRM program since 1998, and has seen the program survive a change of administration.

“I was appointed by and therefore associated with the former mayor, who was the current mayor's political rival. I wasn't sure I would be able to continue my work when the new mayor assumed office, but he realized the program's importance and allowed it to continue.”

Indeed, the mayor took it further: He strengthened the CRM office headed by Delima, and supported the creation of a coastal enforcement and protection unit. In 2004, the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project assisted the local government through a comprehensive training program for its CRM staff. This paved the way for an intensive coastal law enforcement campaign that soon controlled illegal fishing in Ubay waters, especially by Danish seine operators and dynamite fishers. “Initially, there was strong resistance from illegal fishers and their political allies,” says Delima. “But we mustered enough support to put together a CRM legislative agenda.”

Today, Ubay's strong CRM attracts visitors from other towns looking to learn from the experience. But the biggest affirmation comes from the local stakeholders themselves, including those who used to actively resist the program. “Fishers, especially those using hook-and-line, say catching fish is so much easier now that there's hardly any illegal fishing in our waters,” says Delima. “And some politicians who used to be our biggest critics now tell us we're doing a good job.”

In fact, few politicians would now directly oppose CRM initiatives, and this is a lesson Delima often shares with others. “When politicians come to visit, I tell them, 'If you're afraid of losing votes because of CRM, don't. People may initially buck CRM, but within two years, they will see its benefits. Start early in your term, then you will have a great program that can carry you through the next election to a second and even a third term.’” (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/20/08)

Fisher, Crusader



Photo: B. Cabrera, FISH Project

“We cannot wait another day for others to stop illegal fishing. We have to do it and we have to do it now,” declares Nasario Avenido, an illegal fisher-turned-sea crusader.

USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project is gaining headway in engaging communities in the fight against illegal fishing in the Philippines. In Ubay town, Bohol, the Project has seen an upsurge of support, including from one self-described ‘reformed violator of the sea’.

For many years, Nasario ‘Sanso’ Avenido operated a *liba-liba* (Danish seine), oblivious of its harmful effects on the sea bed and fish stocks. Today, he has become the driving force behind a campaign that has stopped *liba-liba* and other illegal fishing in his village.

It has been an arduous road for this father of four. As *liba-liba* operator, he witnessed the decline of fisheries in his community and realized he was as much to blame as others who used destructive fishing methods. Remorseful, he joined his village’s sea patrol and volunteered to educate others on the ill effects of illegal fishing.

Peers hurled insults at him and avoided his presence, but Sanso persisted. He became a fish warden, enduring death threats from those affected by his crusade. Through radio, he appealed to other fishers to stop the carnage of the sea. “If you do not stop killing our fishery resources, you will soon kill all of us,” he warned.

With training from the FISH Project, Sanso has become skilled in the use of the global positioning system, gathering evidence of illegal fishing and preparing statements for police reports. His team has made several arrests, filed cases and collected fines for various fishing violations.

The threats continue and Sanso admits to fear; his dedication to duty demands time away from his family and entails braving storms on empty stomachs in unfamiliar waters. But his conviction in his crusade has become stronger with every arrest of a violator and at every sight of a happy fisherman’s face carrying the day’s catch.

Each day, Sanso delights in the scene of hook-and-line fishers on small boats animating the placid waters once ruled by *liba-liba*, attesting to the increasing fish population in the protected sea. He is convinced: the damage caused by destructive fishing has begun to heal. (A *Gulayan*, FISH Project, 10.06.05)

Making Amends



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

Allan Abad used to be a trawl operator; now he is a strong advocate against illegal fishing.

Trawling was rampant in Danajon Bank in central Philippines until 2000, years after it had been first outlawed in the country's municipal waters. In Ubay, Bohol, one of several towns around Danajon, the practice was significantly controlled when the local government launched an anti-illegal fishing campaign in 2001. Allan Abad, then a town councilor and at one time a trawl operator, initially backed the campaign as a matter of political expediency. Today, he is one of its staunchest champions.

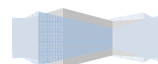
Abad owned a trawling business that operated in Danajon Bank from 1995 to 1998. It was a lucrative business, he says. "But in 1998, I was elected to the local council, so I sold the business to relatives."

As councilor, Abad tolerated trawling, even after a new mayor assumed office in 2001 and began to enforce a strict anti-illegal fishing policy,

"From the amount of fines we collected, I saw it was a good revenue-generating program for the local government," he says. He supported the campaign, but did not dissuade his relatives from trawling, telling them only that they should pay the right penalty if they got caught. They did, and got caught too often they lost money and decided to quit the business.

Abad now serves as the mayor's private secretary. He remains a hard-nosed businessman and politician, but has also become a committed environmental advocate, thanks to the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project. "FISH gave us several trainings," he says. "With each training, I learned something new, and my commitment grew."

He calls trawling a mistake, one of his biggest regrets. "I'm just fortunate my work allows me the chance to make amends," he says. (A. Sia/FISH Project, 12/02/08)



Worth the Risk



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

It's a rare time when Ralph Lagura is at his desk – his job entails long hours of physically risky but psychologically rewarding field work.

Ralph Lagura describes his job as “risky.” As fish examiner of Ubay town in the central Philippine province of Bohol, he regularly joins sea patrols, sometimes staying at sea for two weeks straight.

Lagura got his job by circumstance: In 2004, at the urging of the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, the Ubay government formed a coastal resource management office (CRMO). A trained horticulturist, Lagura was working with the municipal agriculture office at the time. “But I was already involved in FISH activities,” he says. “When the fisheries bureau invited the local government to a fish examiners' training, the mayor sent me.”

Subsequently, Lagura was assigned to the CRMO. He participated in several coastal law enforcement trainings conducted by FISH, where he learned to chart maps and use a GPS receiver. The skills now come in handy: On sea patrols, he serves a dual role as fish examiner and navigator. It is a physically taxing job, involving long hours on both water and land, in calm and rough weather.

“We chase illegal fishers at sea, then we must follow their cases in court,” Lagura says.

The risks are great: Besides the natural hazards of work, there are threats coming from irate illegal fishers. “Part of the job,” shrugs Lagura, who insists he is happier here than in his old job. “I can't think of anything more gratifying than being told by a subsistence fisher that his family is eating better because of what we do,” he says. “I get that. A lot. More so now than before.” (A. Sia/FISH Project, 12/02/08)

Community Leader Passes Commitment Test

Village starts anew after blast fishers attack marine sanctuary



(Photo: A Sia/FISH Project)

“If we quit, we'd be the biggest losers,” says community leader Romeo Galvez.

As president of a fishers association, Romeo Galvez holds serious responsibilities, not the least of which is to steer his group as they confront the many challenges of managing a marine sanctuary. In February 2008, Galvez's commitment to conservation was severely tested when a rogue group of fishers attacked the sanctuary with dynamite, wiping out the gains of two years of protection. He pulled his disheartened group together and got them back on track.

Galvez, a fish trader, heads the Humay-humay Fisherfolk Association of Ubay, Bohol, Philippines, that manages a 74-hectare marine sanctuary established by the municipal government in 2006. He has lived in the village since the 1980s, and witnessed the rapid decline of its once productive fisheries.

“Danish seine fishers used to frequent this area,” Galvez relates. “Back in the 1980s, they'd get as much as 30kg of fish with each haul of their seine, but by the 1990s, their catch had dwindled.”

Even then, Galvez says, people engaged in free-for-all fishing. “Danish seine, blast fishing, beach seine fishing – they were all over the place. I saw that fishers were catching fewer and fewer fish, but I didn't really see the connection until I got involved in the FISH Project.”

Focused on promoting the sustainable management of fisheries and coastal resources by local governments and communities, the 7-year (2003-2010) USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project introduced Galvez and his fellow villagers to the concept of overfishing, and stressed the need for protection and management.

“FISH and local officials encouraged our group to help protect the sanctuary, and we did, but it was not until we saw the fish come back that we truly understood,” he says.

On February 14, 2008, as the community celebrated their annual *fiesta*, blast fishers from a village nearby entered the sanctuary, destroying much of what had been restored by two years of protection. Disgusted villagers told Galvez, “What's the point of our no-fishing rule? We should have taken the fish ourselves, at least we would have used nets and not destroyed the corals.”

Galvez himself was devastated. He had grown accustomed to seeing many fishes in the sanctuary. He was especially fond of the mullets that seemed to have suddenly appeared in the area. “I didn't see them for a long time, and suddenly they were there,” he narrates. “Now they're gone again. I haven't seen them since that blast fishing incident in February.”

But he has kept the faith, appealed for help from the local government, and rallied fellow villagers to hold on: “If we quit, we'd be the biggest losers.” With assistance from FISH, the village has built a guardhouse, and Galvez is hopeful that round-the-clock protection will soon bring back the mullets, and with them, his community's confidence in conservation. (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/27/08)

Village Renews Commitment to Conservation

Enforcement intensified after blast fishing incident



(Photo: A Sia./FISH Project)

“We must persevere, the fishes will come back,” says fish warden Nasario Avenido.

When blast fishers struck his community's marine sanctuary one morning in February 2008, Nasario Avenido feared his fellow villagers would abandon their guard duties at the sanctuary. They had diligently protected the sanctuary for two years, and were starting to benefit from improved conditions of reef habitats and fish stocks. Seeing all that disappear in an instant made them question the merit of their effort, but with support from the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, Avenido and other community leaders helped the village find a new resolve for conservation.

Located in Ubay town, Bohol, Philippines, the sanctuary was established in 2006 as part of FISH's strategy to encourage local government and communities to support coastal resource management (CRM). Avenido, a municipal fish warden, says his village was quick to embrace the sanctuary. “We really had no choice, our sea had hardly any fish left for fishers to catch,” he says.

The sanctuary thrived under protection. Fish stocks started to recover within a year, and slowly, habitat conditions improved. Soon, the villagers were catching more fish. But as the benefits grew, so did the threat of intrusion. “Fishers outside the village knew as well as we did where the fishes were, and they were constantly trying to poach on our sanctuary,” Avenido says. “So the blast fishing incident was not a total surprise.”

He still remembers the exact date when it happened: February 14, 2008. It was their annual village feast, and everyone was busy with the celebrations. “I suspect the blast fishers had been watching us, and they struck as soon as they saw that the sanctuary was unguarded,” he says.

Despite quick action by enforcers, the blast fishers got away, leaving behind about 45 kilos of dead fish. “It was very discouraging,” says Avenido. “We worked so hard only to see others steal the fruits of our labor. But I told my neighbors, we could not give up, not after all our hard work. Besides the alternative was to go back to where we were before we had the sanctuary, and that was not really an option.”

With assistance from FISH, the villagers built a guardhouse, allowing them to watch the sanctuary round-the-clock. So far there has not been a repeat of the blast fishing incident. The reef and fish stocks have yet to show significant improvement, but with renewed commitment, the villagers vow never to let their guard down again.

“We must persevere, the fishes will come back in good time,” says Avenido. “They did before.” (A. Sia./FISH Project, 11/28/08)

Bigger Hooks for Bigger Fish



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project

Saleslady Johna Turtoga notes increased sales of larger-size fishing hooks in Ubay town, Philippines, a hopeful sign of recovery of fish stocks.

Johna Turtoga, who works in a hardware store in Ubay, Bohol, says that in the last four years, her fisher-buyers have shifted to larger-size fishing hooks. Hardly noticeable to the passing pedestrian perhaps but such 'upsizing' of gear seems remarkable to Tortuga, who has been in the business close to 10 years.

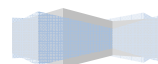
It certainly is good news to the USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, because it indicates that hook-and-line fishers are catching bigger fish, a hopeful sign that fish stocks have begun to improve in the severely depleted waters around Ubay, thanks to the management efforts instituted by the municipal local government in recent years.

Ubay is one of 11 Bohol municipalities that border Danajon Bank, site of the Philippines' only double barrier reef. It has a large fishing community, sharing with the other municipalities Danajon Bank's naturally productive fishing grounds that have unfortunately been depleted by decades of destructive fishing.

A survey conducted in Danajon by the FISH Project in 2004 showed an average trawlable biomass density of 0.45 tons per sq km, indicating a very low demersal standing biomass. Live coral cover inside and adjacent to three marine protected areas surveyed in 2004 showed reef condition to be generally poor.

Since then, however, with training and assistance provided by the FISH Project, the local government has set up a number of marine protected areas, instituted a fishery registration system, and intensified its campaign against illegal fishing. The results so far have been encouraging: In 2006, the Project reported a 9.21% average increase in catch rate by fishery-independent methods for Danajon Bank.

Many of Ubay's hook-and-line fishers concur with such finding, saying they are catching more fish in less time than they used to four years ago. And judging from the larger size hooks they buy, it appears they may also be reeling in the bigger fish. (A Sia, FISH Project, 03.19.08)



Local Governments Tackle Coastal Issues

Systemic approach curbs decades-old destructive fishing



Photo J Unson, FISH Project
Law enforcers and technical people from four municipalities work together to control illegal fishing around the Philippines' only double barrier reef.

There are clear signs of resource recovery, including sightings of some species last seen in the area a decade ago.

Challenge

The municipalities of Bien Unido, Carlos P. Garcia, Talibon and Ubay, Bohol have jurisdiction over a significant portion of waters where the Philippines' only double barrier reef is found. Partly because of this, the towns have been a preferred site of donor-assisted coastal resource management (CRM) projects from as early as the 1980s. None of the early projects were sustained, however; local government and community involvement fizzled out as soon as external assistance ended. With management happening only in bursts and spurts, overfishing and destructive fishing proliferated, and the condition of the reef and associated fisheries went into a steady decline.

Initiative

The USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project started its work in the four towns in 2003, focused on instituting the systems needed to promote the sustainability of CRM interventions. By providing training, policy and advocacy support, the Project encouraged each local government to confront its fisheries problems head on and organize itself for CRM. Simultaneously, it urged the four towns to work together through an inter-municipality coastal law enforcement council, and underscored the vital importance of collaboration and ecosystem-based management by helping communities to set up a network of marine protected areas based on the area's larval dispersal and water current patterns.

Results

All four municipalities have allocated resources, formed coastal law enforcement teams, strengthened habitat protection, and installed measures to control fishing effort. Working together, they have been particularly effective in the enforcement of coastal and fishery laws. Illegal fishing has been significantly reduced, habitats and fish stocks are showing signs of recovery, and hook-and-line fishers are reporting higher fish catches. There are even sightings of some marine species last seen in the area over a decade ago. To ensure that these gains are sustained, each municipality has created an office dedicated to coordinating and overseeing its CRM program, and taken steps to get national government approval to make this office permanent. (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/18/08)

Beyond the Call



(Photo: FISH Project)

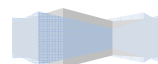
As fish examiner, Hilot (right) responds 24/7 to the call of duty.

Early in her career with the Philippines' Department of Agriculture (DA), Roselle Hilot, who trained as a soil technologist, chose to work with DA's Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources "mainly because it was closer to my house." Since then, however, she has been totally "fisherized," she says. "The job is demanding, but it's satisfying, especially now that all our hard work has begun to benefit the small fishers."

Today, as fish examiner, Hilot assists several towns in Bohol, Philippines. Since participating in several trainings organized by the USAID/Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, she has been closely involved in coastal law enforcement, even joining sea patrols, especially in the town of Ubay. "It's part of my job to advise the local government on fisheries planning and management," she explains. "I wanted to understand what enforcement entailed, so I joined sea patrols."

What she learned cemented her commitment to the enforcement effort. "The coastal law enforcers' job is difficult and risky," she says. "They stay at sea for long periods of time, maybe for weeks, sometimes in bad weather, running after the bad guys. The least I can do is support them. When they call, I must respond, 24/7."

Their hard work is paying dividends for fishing communities – fish yields by hook-and-line are up, as are siganid harvests from fish corrals. It is paying off for local government as well – with improved enforcement, the government is collecting a sizable amount of fisheries fees. Most of all, it has become psychologically rewarding for law enforcers. "In the past, coastal law enforcers were openly called 'sneak patrols,'" Hilot says. "Not anymore. For many people, but especially for small fishers, they have become real sea patrols doing a good job for the community." (A. Sia/FISH Project, 11/30/08)



Getting Back His Good Name

Fish warden is out to prove conservation works



(Photo:A. Sia)

“We’ve invested much time and effort in the sanctuary, we cannot let it fail,” says Sulpecio Navarro.

Sulpecio Navarro admits he has an arrest record for possession of dynamited fish, but it does not deter him from doing his job. Now chairman of a people’s organization and a deputy fish warden, he leads a group tasked to manage and protect their village’s fish sanctuary.

“To set the record straight, I didn’t actually use dynamite – I took some fish caught by someone else who used dynamite,” Navarro clarifies. “I do know it was wrong and I regret doing it. Now that I am a fish warden, it sounds even worse that I have a police record. I worry that people take it against me, use it as an excuse to ignore my authority.”

But, he points out, “what’s past is past. The good thing is that I learned from the experience. At least as fish warden I’m able to correct some of the wrongs of the past.”

A fisher since he was 7, Navarro witnessed for himself the depletion of fishery resources in his hometown of Cantilan, Surigao del Sur. “Over the years, fishers caught fewer and fewer fish. Many shifted to other gear or other types of fish to improve production, but over time their catch would still go down,” he relates.

Destructive fishing, such as dynamite fishing and the illegal use of Danish seine in municipal waters, gets much of the blame. There have been efforts to address the problem, including the declaration of fish sanctuaries in Cantilan’s waters.

Navarro himself is no stranger to the management of a fish sanctuary, even if his first experience at managing a sanctuary did not turn out well.

“Our first sanctuary covered more than 300 hectares,” he explains. “It was too big for one group to manage, so four groups were given the task. But coordination was difficult and in the end people gave up.”

In 2005, with assistance from the USAID FISH Project, the local government re-established the sanctuary, reducing it to 28 hectares, a much manageable size, according to Navarro.

“We’re seeing much better results this time. The sanctuary is now teeming with fish,” he notes, marvelling that “the fish are so tame and not afraid of people.”

Having gone this far and after seeing what they can achieve, Navarro cannot imagine going back. “We’ve invested much time and effort in the sanctuary, we cannot let it fail,” he says. “I am doing this for the community but I am also doing it for myself and my family. If the sanctuary works, people will know my intentions are good. Then maybe they will want to help out more to protect the sanctuary.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/02/09)

Fisher Pushes Family Planning

Village accepts need to ease pressure on fishery resources



(Photo:A. Sia)

“In 2004, I counted 12 births a month,” says Carlos Consigna. “Now we have two.”

Carlos Consigna, a fisher, has a curious side job. He is a “male peer educator,” tasked with promoting family planning in Ayoke, his island village in Cantilan town, Surigao del Sur on the eastern Philippine seaboard.

“Not an easy task,” Consigna remarks. He has had neighbors berating him for meddling in their private affairs.

“I’ve been told many times to get my nose out of other people’s business,” Consigna relates. His ready answer. “I only want to help you raise healthy families. If you have four children, you can adequately feed them with one kilo of rice. But if you have eight, will the same amount of rice be enough?”

Consigna is one of several community-based peer educators trained under a technical assistance program provided by the USAID FISH Project, which encouraged the integration of reproductive health and population management in local development plans as a key measure to ease pressure on critical fishery resources.

Despite the arguments he has had with his neighbors, Consigna happily notes fewer births in the village than before the program started. “In 2004, I counted about 12 births a month,” he says. “Now we have two.”

But he stresses: “It’s not simply about reducing family size. It’s not about not having children or having too few children that our community will die out. I always tell the men I counsel that the idea is for each couple to make an informed decision on how many children they as parents and we as a society can reasonably provide for.”

Interestingly, the engagement of the community in the management of a fish sanctuary appears to have made the villagers more accepting of family planning.

According to Consigna, the sanctuary was established in 2002 but did not prosper because it was not properly situated. The FISH Project reconstituted the sanctuary in 2005, and transferred it to a more suitable location. Responsibility for the sanctuary was given to a people’s organization made up of community members trained in resource management and the enforcement of sanctuary rules.

“Being responsible for the sanctuary has made people more conscious of the fact that fish is a finite resource,” says Consigna. “Now they tell me – we work hard to protect the sanctuary so that someday we will have more fish. But if we keep having children and still be dependent on the same resource, no amount of hard work will allow us to catch up. We will never have enough fish.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/08/09)

Ex-Blast Fishing Boss Now Promotes Good Fishing

Fishers cooperate as protected habitat begins to recover



(Photo: A. Sia)

“If I was still in the trade, I would have given it up. At any rate, I wanted to make amends,” says Crisologo Anino.

A retired fish trader, Crisologo Anino is finding himself going back to his old turf by the sea, but in a completely new role. Back in the day when he was still active in the trade, he would ensure that he had regular supply of fish by providing fishers with explosives used to catch fish. Now he heads a community-based group trained and mandated to run after destructive fishers, including blast fishers.

“I didn’t think then that blast fishing was wrong. Like nearly everyone in our community, I considered it as simply another way to catch fish. I knew it destroyed the corals, but I didn’t know that corals mattered,” he says.

He knows better now.

Anino first saw the importance of coral reefs when the local government set up a marine protected area (MPA) at his village. “I realized how bad blast fishing really was. It was not just killing our corals. If we allowed it to continue, it could actually have killed our fisheries,” he says.

He resolved to help stop all forms of destructive fishing. “If I was still in the trade I would have given it up,” he avers. “At any rate, I wanted to make amends.”

Joining one of four groups tasked to manage their MPA, Anino faced some early disappointments. “We couldn’t control poaching, conditions in the MPA did not seem to improve, and our members got frustrated and gave up,” he relates.

At 355 hectares, the MPA proved to be too difficult to guard. It was also not ideally situated in an area with mud substrate and naturally low productivity.

In 2005, with assistance from the USAID FISH Project, the community and local government agreed to relocate the sanctuary to a much smaller (25 hectares) coral reef area. The Project also provided capacity-building and information-education-communication support to Anino’s group, who continued to manage the MPA.

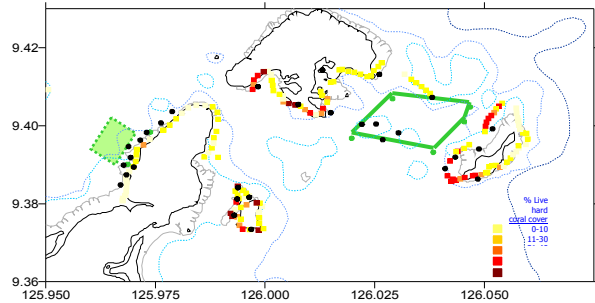
Fishers have yet to see significant increases in fish yields, but they are seeing much improvement within the MPA. “There are so many fish in the MPA now,” says Anino. “There are still many challenges, but things are looking up. Slowly, more and more people are realizing that we are doing this for the common good.”(A. Sia, *FISH Project, 12/11/09*)

Improving the Odds for Community Initiatives

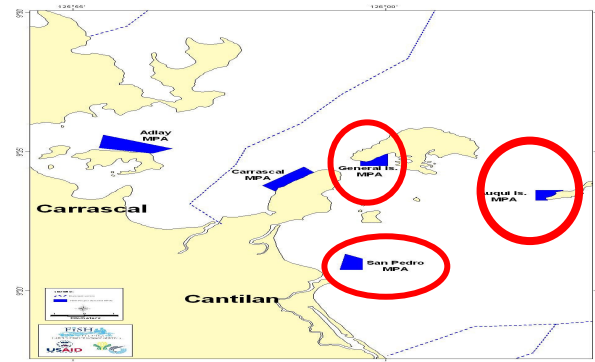
Better marine sanctuary design leads to better protection

In 2003, the municipality of Cantilan, Surigao del Sur informally declared a 320-ha fish sanctuary between General and Ayoke Islands. The sanctuary was given an annual budget of Php400,000, but its sustainability remained in doubt without the ordinance required to legalize its existence. This meant that the people’s organizations (POs) designated to manage the sanctuary had no legal mandate to enforce sanctuary rules and regulations; moreover, they were also plagued by a lack of technical skills to adequately manage the sanctuary.

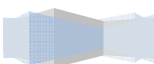
USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, which began working with the Cantilan LGU in 2004, has sought to address these issues through training and capacity-building, and by identifying other problems that may hinder the sanctuary’s success. After an assessment of the area that showed only a small part of the sanctuary had corals, the Project organized a series of stakeholder meetings to develop a consensus strategy for management that led to the identification of three new, smaller sites, where good coral cover and fish stocks were observed. The new sites have proven to be easier to guard and manage, and show more benefits through the improvement of reef habitats, encouraging those involved to sustain protection and management. (R Mancao, FISH Project, 10.23.06)



BEFORE Four POs “managed” the Cantilan Sanctuary without legal mandate, ‘illegally’ enforcing sanctuary rules. Lacking expert guidance, they set up the sanctuary in a coral-poor area. Despite funding support from the LGU, management was haphazard and had little to offer in terms of improvement of habitat and fish stocks.



AFTER USAID’s FISH Project helped stakeholders identify three new sites with good coral cover and fish stocks. The sites were officially declared as sanctuaries, giving the POs legal mandate for their management. Better suited for habitat protection than the old site, they quickly showed the early benefits of resource management.



New Tactics Boost Marine Sanctuaries

Community strategies improve enforcement of sanctuary rules



Photo: R Mancao, FISH Project
Local officials and community members attend the inauguration of their MPA in full force.

Folksy tactics have improved marine protection in Lanuza Bay, Surigao del Sur, Philippines.

Challenge

The use of marine protected areas (MPAs) as an option for fisheries management and habitat recovery is widely accepted in the Philippines. In Lanuza Bay, Surigao del Sur, there are many MPAs, including some that date back to 1996, but until recently, success stories had been few and far between. While policies for management had been drawn up, communities and their local governments needed concrete strategies to adequately address frequent violations of MPA rules.

Initiative

USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project is building local capabilities in MPA protection by helping local governments and people's organizations to develop and carry out innovative ways to guard and manage their MPAs. After revitalizing local interest in the MPAs, the Project is developing effective and efficient community-based patrol rough training and mentoring. Team leaders are identified and motivated to guide their teams in devising their own enforcement strategies. The emphasis is on participatory decision-making, to deepen the members' interest and stake in the collective effort to protect their MPA, thus helping promote the MPA's sustainability. In the broader context, the Lanuza Bay experience is also designed to generate replicable strategies with potential for wider application.

Results

Today in Lanuza Bay, enforcers are showing a zealous commitment to their jobs, guarding their MPAs round the-clock, and constantly looking for new ways to improve enforcement. At least three indigenous strategies have so far emerged. In Caglayag, Carrascal, the community calls their strategy "guarding by gender," because men and women keep separate guarding schedules. This ensures that the MPA is kept well-guarded, even while members attend to livelihood and family chores. In Ayoke, Cantilan, MPA protection is a "family business", as families take turns in guarding their MPA. And in General Island, also in Cantilan, the strategy is called "guarding by peer group." Here, the MPA is managed by a people's organization, whose board of directors determines the members of each peer group; the peer groups take turns in guarding the MPA. Such folksy tactics help ensure protection remains a community endeavor. (R Mancao, FISH Project, 10.19.06)

Village Starts Greening Up Its Act



(Photo: A. Sia)

Village chief Erlinda Ramirez sees education as a key to fully converting fishers to sustainable fishing.

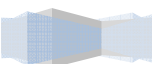
Caglayag is a picturesque coastal village -- verdant grass-paved roads lend it a playful air and charm, belying its somber story. Like most coastal villages in the Philippines, Caglayag, located in Carrascal, Surigao del Sur, is home to a fishing community made up mostly of small-scale, generally low-income fishers and their families. Like in the other villages, illegal fishing has been a perennial problem.

But Caglayag appears to be on the cusp of change, as it tries to find a balance between today's needs and the future. Village chief Erlinda Ramirez says she noted a shift in fishers' behavior following a technical assistance program under the USAID FISH Project, which provided intensive information-education-communication, training and community organizing support to a people's organization tasked to manage the village fish sanctuary.

Relates Ramirez, "Before, there were many blast fishers among our community, mostly poor fishers who only cared about where to get the day's meal and couldn't be bothered about what happened to the environment. Now it's rare to see anyone blast fishing here. Our fishers remain poor, but they now understand that it is not the right way to earn a living."

Promoting change remains a struggle, she admits. "There's a ban on compressor fishing, because of its harmful effects on fishers' health and because it is associated with the use of cyanide. But our fishers swear that they are not using cyanide, and that compressor fishing has not affected their health, so they generally ignore the ban."

Still, Ramirez is upbeat. "They resisted the sanctuary, too, but with education they came around. Now they help protect it," she says. "With more knowledge and comprehension, I know our fishers will be open to more change." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/09/09)



Happy to Help

Fish sanctuary prospers with community's help



(Photo:A. Sia)

“This must remain a partnership with government,” says farmer-fish warden Edgardo Pangadlin. “We cannot do it alone.”

A fisher for 30 years, Edgardo Pangadlin had already shifted to farming in 2006 when he was asked to join a people's organization tasked to manage a fish sanctuary in his village. Nonetheless, he willingly agreed. “I couldn't turn my back on something that supported me and my family for decades,” he says.

Established in 2001, the Caglayag fish sanctuary was run for several years by the municipal government of Carrascal, a coastal town in Surigao del Sur province on the eastern Philippine seaboard. It did not prosper, according to Pangadlin. “The municipality did not have the personnel to guard it 24/7, so there was rampant poaching,” he relates.

In 2005, with support from the USAID FISH Project, the municipal government reconstituted the sanctuary, giving the community an active role in its management. The project organized a series of workshops to train community members in the rudiments of resource management and the enforcement of sanctuary rules, while simultaneously undertaking an intensive information-education-communication campaign and helping stakeholders, primarily the fishers, plan for the management and protection of the sanctuary.

“As far as I know, it was the first time that the municipal government involved fishers in decision-making,” he says. “For the first time, our fishers realized that the government was there to help, and not merely regulate their fishing activities.”

The results have been remarkable, notes Pangadlin. “Since the community became involved, we've had very few poaching incidents because we are able to guard the sanctuary round-the-clock,” he says. “Our resources have begun to recover. For example, after many years, fishers are now again able to catch as much as 3-5 kilos of octopus just outside the sanctuary.”

“But we still need government support,” he stresses. “The community has been very active, but this must remain a partnership with government. We cannot do it alone.”(A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/10/09)

Changing Norms Help Deter Illegal Fishing

Illegal fishers losing social and political clout



(Photo:A. Sia)

“Illegal fishers used to seem untouchable. Not anymore,” says Edgardo Intano.

In his nearly three decades in government service, Edgardo Intano has not seen as much support for coastal resource management as in the last six years. “It’s been a long, often frustrating battle,” he says. “It’s only when I look back that I realize how far we have come, that we’ve actually moved forward.”

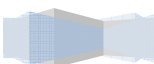
Intano is currently the municipal agriculture officer (MAO) of Carrascal, a coastal town in the eastern Philippine seaboard province of Surigao del Sur. Having previously worked with the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, he has always had a bias for fisheries, but back when he started as MAO, his office had a total budget of only Php200,000. That was hardly enough to cover their programs for agriculture, let alone fisheries, he says.

Things have changed significantly since then. Now the MAO has Php500,000 to spend on coastal resource management alone. “Our budget for coastal management has increased steadily in the last six years, from Php180,000 to Php300,000 and now Php500,000,” Intano says. “This means we actually have a program for fisheries and coastal management. I have, for instance, been able to provide incentives to encourage good performance in the enforcement of fishery laws.”

Illegal fishing has been one of Carrascal’s biggest, and most persistent, fisheries problems – and one of Intano’s biggest frustrations. “After all these years, we’re still running after illegal fishers, so yes, this job can be frustrating,” he remarks. “But as big as the problem still seems to be, I also know we have made tremendous progress. For one, there is hardly any dynamite fishing here anymore.”

The high visibility of law enforcers has been a major factor, but so have the public’s high level of awareness of the harmful effects of illegal fishing and the fishing community’s active involvement in resource management. All these came about because of an intensive information-education-communication, capacity-building and training program for stakeholder communities undertaken by the USAID FISH Project between 2003 and 2008.

Intano believes the “balance of power” has shifted from the illegal fishers to proponents of sustainable fishing. Illegal fishers used to seem untouchable, he says. “Not anymore. Now they are afraid of getting caught and, I believe, of public censure.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/10/09)



Volunteers Keep Sanctuary Going

Improving fish production strengthens community support for protection



(Photo: A. Sia)

“I’m happy I’m doing this,” says Vergilio Almaza. “The fish are back and our community is changing for the better.”

In the three years they have been involved in the management of a fish sanctuary in their village, Vergilio Almaza says, he and other volunteers have made a clear difference.

“The sanctuary has legally been in existence since 1999, but I can truly say it hasn’t been adequately protected before volunteers were brought into the management process,” Almaza relates.

The sanctuary is located in Caglayag, a small fishing village in Carrascal town in Surigao del Sur province on the Philippines’ eastern seaboard. Almaza belongs to a people’s organization that has been tasked to manage it.

Initially established as a 70-hectare protected area by municipal ordinance, the sanctuary was at first guarded by policemen based in the town proper.

“They were on duty for only eight hours during the day. At night they went home, so the sanctuary was left unprotected at least 60 percent of the time,” notes Almaza.

In 2005, following recommendations from the USAID FISH Project, the local government expanded the sanctuary to 75 hectares and reconstituted its management, making it more community-based by assigning primary responsibility to Almaza’s group. The Project then trained community members to enforce and manage the sanctuary.

“Divers who had seen the area before it was protected say there are now so many more fish in the sanctuary and the corals are much improved,” says Almaza. “I also know fishers who fish just outside the perimeter of the sanctuary are catching bigger and better quality fish.”

For Almaza, hearing these stories and seeing the improvements for himself are the biggest rewards of a difficult job. “We’re not paid to do this. We’re not even provided with comfortable raincoats for when it rains and it gets very cold out at sea. Many times we have to battle big waves and strong winds,” he says.

“But I’m happy I’m doing this. The fish are back, the corals are coming back, even our community is changing for the better. It is a slow process but it is clearly happening. For one, I now get reports when poachers attempt to enter the sanctuary. In the past nobody seemed to care.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/02/09)

Blast Fisher Leaves Trade for Law Enforcement

Reformed blast fishing kingpin wages war against illegal fishers



(Photo:A. Sia)

“It is my duty to stop illegal fishing,” Rufino Bulabog Jr. says. “It is what I have to do.”

At 20, Rufino Bulabog Jr. witnessed his father go to jail for blast fishing. At 29, he lost his father to a blast fishing accident. Neither of these tragedies convinced him to stop the illegal practice. Instead, he got deeper into the blast fishing trade: He began supplying others in his village with explosives for fishing.

One might surmise that Bulabog wielded enough influence that he never got jail for his illegal business. Indeed, what he got was an offer of a job to – of all things – enforce fishery laws.

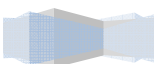
He took it. He now says the life of crime was for him not a choice but a necessity. “I had been a blast fisher since I was a child going out to sea with my father,” he says. “It was the only way I knew to earn a living.”

Not wasting the chance to start fresh, he took his job seriously, waging an intensive campaign against illegal fishing that included even those fishers who used to be his clients. This turned him into a pariah in his village. “For two years, I could not go home,” he recalls. “They called me a traitor and said they would kill me if I returned.”

Bulabog is now 45. He has been a fish warden for 8 years. Looking back he says what kept him going was the sure knowledge that he was doing the right thing. “It helped that I got some training in law enforcement from the USAID FISH Project,” he relates. “It taught me to do the right thing the right way, which gave me the confidence to do my job.”

Bulabog is happy doing what he does, and happier still that his old neighbors now understand why it must be done. “Many of them have since shifted to net fishing,” he says. “It’s not earning them as much as blast fishing, but then they don’t have to worry about getting caught. And they do say that their catch has improved, so they know things are at least getting better.”

“I regret my part in the depletion of our resources,” Bulabog confesses. “All I can do now is to help reverse it, to ensure that it does not happen again. As fish warden it is my duty to stop illegal fishing. It is what I have to do.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/03/09)



Looking Ahead for Future Conservation Problems



(Photo:A. Sia)

Perlito Montanez is certain his community will rally together against current and future threats to their sanctuary.

In the 1990s, Perlito Montanez, then chair of the fisheries and aquatic resource management council in Adlay, suggested that the council should set up a fish sanctuary to help reverse declining fish catch trends.

The council agreed but later abandoned the idea because of strong opposition from the community.

Adlay is a coastal village in Carrascal, Surigao del Sur on the eastern Philippine seaboard. About 40 percent of its residents are engaged in fishing.

“In the 1990s, many of our fishers were complaining that there was hardly any fish to catch in our waters, but they did not see why we had to have a fish sanctuary,” Montanez relates.

Years later, in 2004, Montanez got another chance to pursue his proposal. The USAID FISH Project had begun providing assistance to several municipalities in Surigao del Sur, which included the establishment of fish sanctuaries. This time, with community organizing, information-education-communication, training and some commodity support from the Project, the people of Adlay were more accepting. In 2006, Adlay officially launched its 84-hectare fish sanctuary.’

Montanez claims fish abundance within the sanctuary has improved significantly the main issue now is not so much the scarcity of fish but the threat of poaching. “Fishers from nearby villages want to enter the sanctuary now that there are plenty of fish there,” he says, but insists he is confident in the community’s ability and commitment to protect their waters.

He worries more about potential runoff from mining operations in the area. Although mining poses a threat to other aspects of their community life, Montanez believes the sanctuary will be their major rallying point. “We have a big stake here. We have all worked very hard to make the sanctuary work. We will – must -- continue to make it work.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/04/09)

Village Builds Fish Sanctuary on Women Power

Marine conservation has become a focus for community engagement



The women of Uba celebrate the success of their fish sanctuary. (Photo: A. Sia)

“Only a handful of us started this. Now 80 percent of the community support the sanctuary,” says the village chief.

When community organizers from the NGO “Green Mindanao” first visited Uba village to try to engage the community in environmental conservation, they found the men too busy with work and unwilling to cooperate. Instead they discovered true advocates in the women, who have since built a fish sanctuary that is considered among the most successful in Cortes, one of several towns that border the biologically significant Lanuza Bay in the eastern Philippine seaboard province of Surigao del Sur.

In the early days, the women found it rough going. When they decided to build a guardhouse at the sanctuary, even their husbands refused to help. “They did not attend our meetings, so they did not fully understand what the sanctuary was all about,” says village chief Arnulfa Duenas. “Some even thought the project was a threat to their livelihood.”

The men, most of them fishers, had feared the sanctuary would erode their catch, which by then was already much diminished because of rampant destructive fishing in the area.

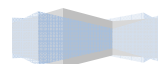
“We women built the guardhouse ourselves,” says Duenas. “We cut some trees and hauled the logs to the sanctuary. Then we hired a carpenter to help us with the construction. Fortunately, the local government was there to support us from the start.”

The men came around within a year, as the benefits of the sanctuary became evident in improved fish yields around the sanctuary. Over time, they became increasingly involved in the running of the sanctuary, which proved particularly helpful when fishers from nearby villages tried to poach on the restricted area.

With help from the USAID FISH Project, the village formulated a management plan to guide their day-to-day operations. “We could not leave the sanctuary unattended, so we established a round-the-clock watch schedule. During the day, the women guarded the sanctuary. At night, the men took over,” Duenas relates. “We’re thankful the men took on the more difficult night duty. It’s cold out here at night.”

Assisted by the FISH Project, the village recently completed a new guardhouse, this time with the men fully involved and taking the lead during its construction.

“There were only a handful of us women who started this. Now I’m happy to say that we are supported by 80 percent of our community, both men and women alike,” Duenas declares. (A. Sia, FISH Project, 11/27/09)



People's Participation Spells the Difference



(Photo:A. Sia)

The participation of stakeholders in resource management has helped ensure that enforcement is consistent and sustained.

One of the key lessons of resource management in developing countries like the Philippines is that the participation of stakeholder communities is essential to raising the success rate of management interventions.

This is a lesson that the town of Cortes has learned well.

Located on the Philippines' eastern seaboard, Cortes was the first of the several municipalities that border Lanuza Bay to aggressively address declining fish production in the commercially important but intensively fished bay.

However, its early efforts at establishing fish sanctuaries met strong resistance from fishers and village leaders. The opposition was such that at one point the mayor felt compelled to charge some village officials with usurpation of authority.

“The sanctuaries were largely government-driven and not highly community-based. Some people's organizations were involved, but there was perhaps not enough effort to engage, consult with, educate or even merely inform other community members about how a sanctuary works,” observes Vincent Duenas, the town's coastal resource management officer.

Undeterred, the local government shouldered on, working with various organizations to slowly incorporate participatory approaches in its program. With help from the USAID FISH Project, it instituted measures to engage stakeholders in sanctuary management, habitat protection, law enforcement and advocacy, while reaching out to the wider community through an expanded information, education and communication drive. It also put together a fairly generous package of benefits, including allowances and health insurance coverage, for community members deputized to enforce sanctuary rules.

All this has helped ensure that enforcement is consistent and sustained, resulting habitat improvement and an increase in fish stocks and fish catches, which finally sealed the communities' approval of the government's management efforts. (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 12/02/09)

Building a Proven Track Record

People's group shows they can be good coastal resource managers



(Photo:A. Sia)

“If we want support from others, we must show them we can deliver our mandate well,” says Joel Alzate (above photo, left).

The marine protected area (MPA) in Mabahin, Cortes in the eastern Philippine seaboard province of Surigao del Sur is run by a group with an unlikely name: the Mabahin Woodcraft Multi-purpose Cooperative.

Joel Alzate, the cooperative's chairman, explains their involvement: “We started out in 1997 as a small group of woodcraftsmen. We now have 69 members, including some fishers. We are concerned about protecting the sea, not only because some of our members are fishers, but also because we are a coastal village and the sea is an important part of our community.”

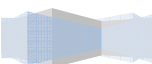
Preparations for the establishment of the MPA began in 2005 with support from the USAID FISH Project and the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

“They involved us in resource assessment, so we saw for ourselves the condition of our coral reefs and other marine habitats,” Alzate relates. Then they trained us in resource management and law enforcement.”

Today, the Mabahin MPA is among the most successful in Surigao del Sur in terms of habitat recovery. A recent survey showed that live coral cover in the area has increased 22 percent, and seagrass cover is excellent at 82%. More significantly for fishers, average fish catch per unit effort has increased to about 10 kilos from only 2 kilos in 2005.

Alzate says local government support has been a major factor for their success. “Our fish wardens are well motivated because of the support they get from the government,” he observes. “They are provided with a contingency fund and gasoline for their patrol boat, as well as a package of benefits that includes an allowance and insurance.”

But it works both ways, Alzate points out. “We also have to build a proven track record of success. If we want support from others, we must show them we can deliver our mandate well,” he says. “I believe we have shown that we are good managers and protectors of our MPA, so there is every reason for the local government to continue to support us.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/11/09)



Mayor Builds Platform on Coastal Management

Program delivers on promise, wins over a critical public



(Photo:A. Sia)

“We are a coastal town. Our welfare lies in sustaining our coastal resources,” says Mayor Pedro Trinidad Jr.

Throughout his many years in government, Cortes Mayor Pedro Trinidad Jr. has held steady in his what he calls his “love for coastal management.” Now his coastal management program is the envy of neighbor towns around Lanuza Bay, a commercially important fishing ground in the eastern Philippine seaboard province of Surigao del Sur.

Trinidad’s advocacy developed early in his government career. As a member of the municipal council of Cortes, he sponsored an ordinance that established what is believed to be the first ever closed season for siganids in Lanuza Bay. Later, as municipal planning and development coordinator, he continued to doggedly push for coastal management, fighting off the frustrations of championing what proved to be an unpopular cause.

“You know how it is. Every mayor has a pet program,” he relates. “I kept urging each administration to support various coastal programs, but not everyone was responsive, and even those who listened could have been more supportive.”

Trinidad did not waste time when he was elected mayor. Promptly, he included coastal management in his administration’s development agenda. His first term was rough going as people reacted negatively to new regulations that were inevitably put in place. Undeterred, he slowly put together what is now acknowledged to be the most comprehensive coastal management program in Lanuza Bay. With technical assistance and community organizing support from the USAID FISH Project and as the benefits of management became more apparent, public support for the program grew.

Today, Cortes has a coastal management program that is acknowledged as the most progressive in all of Lanuza Bay. It includes marine protected areas, information-education-communication, habitat rehabilitation and management, and a strong law enforcement component that relies heavily on community participation. The town’s budget for these services reached more than Php2 million in 2008. Dedicated personnel, including two policemen, have been assigned to coastal management. In addition, the municipality has put together a generous incentive package that includes allowances and health insurance for those actively involved in law enforcement.

The mayor is not done yet. “Our coastal program still needs to be expanded,” he says. “We are a coastal town with a majority that depends on coastal resources. Our people’s welfare -- our very survival -- lies in sustaining these resources. There is so much more we must do to really do the job well.” (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 12/04/09)

Building a Sustainable Village



(Photo:A. Sia)

Vivencio Cabalit builds boats to augment his income from fishing – and helps build community support for fishery conservation through active advocacy.

Fisher-boat builder Vivencio Cabalit of Uba firmly supports conservation efforts that he hopes will turn his village into a sustainable community. Uba, located in Cortes town in the Philippine eastern seaboard province of Surigao del Sur, is a fishing village, being close to rich nearshore waters and tuna grounds.

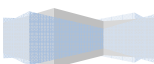
But Cabalit was not always a conservation advocate. He settled in Uba when he was 23, newly married and looking for economic opportunities. “Back then, there were only 10 of us fishers here and there were plenty of fish. We caught mostly big tunas. We didn’t have to go far at all,” he relates.

Over the years, fish stocks began to dwindle. “Nearshore there were fewer – and smaller – fish,” Cabalit says. Still, he managed to get by with fishing offshore, where stocks remained relatively abundant.

“When some women in the village told me about a plan to establish a fish sanctuary, I said no way. Like many of the men here, I thought it meant we could no longer fish. With children to feed and send to school, that was not an option,” says Cabalit.

He changed his mind after a visit to his birth town in Hinatuan (also in Surigao del Sur). “Hinatuan already had a sanctuary and my father was the treasurer of the organization that managed it. He showed me how the sanctuary worked.”

Thus Cabalit became one of the first men in Uba to actively support the sanctuary, helping convince other fishers to give it a chance to work. In recent years, assistance from the USAID FISH Project has greatly improved the community’s management of the sanctuary, raising Cabalit’s confidence as he continues to spread the word about its importance. “We need efforts like to sustain our fishery resources through generations,” he says. (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 12/01/09)



Farmer Sows Seeds of Sea Stewardship

Fishers reap the benefits of coastal management



(Photo: A. Sia)

“We have to sow to reap. This is what we’re doing now, sowing the seeds of stewardship,” says Mansuito Isiang.

Mansuito Isiang is a farmer, but he spends much of his time watching over a 43-hectare fish sanctuary in his village.

Isiang heads the Capandan Multipurpose Cooperative, the people’s organization given the responsibility to protect and manage the sanctuary. But to him the sanctuary has always been a personal cause.

“It was first proposed in 2001 during a village assembly but was rejected,” he relates. “I was not the cooperative’s chairman then but I supported the proposal -- I knew we needed the sanctuary. Poison fishing was rampant in our waters at that time and I realized it was making our waters less productive by killing even the young fishes.”

When Isiang took over as chairman in 2002, he pursued the proposal. He and his group began installing buoys to mark the boundaries of the sanctuary even before the town council approved the ordinance that would officially establish it (the ordinance passed in 2003).

“We even started building a guardhouse but ran out of funds before we could finish it,” says Isiang. “Fortunately, the USAID FISH Project came in with fresh funding in 2004, so we were able to complete its construction.”

The FISH Project also provided training in law enforcement and sanctuary management for Isiang’s group, as well as information-education-communication support to increase public awareness of and improve compliance with sanctuary rules.

Within a year, the benefits of protection were evident. “I monitor the sanctuary every day,” says Isiang. “I see how much the conditions there have improved. The corals are healthier, and there are obviously more fishes inside and around the sanctuary. Fishers in our village who used to catch only 2-5 kg of fish now take home 10-30 kg.”

He adds, “I am a farmer, I understand that we have to sow to reap. This is what we’re doing now, sowing the seeds of sea stewardship so fishers can reap the rewards. We have persuaded all of our elected officials and many of the more than 1,000 people living in our village to support our cause. We still have to convince those fishers that continue to try to poach on our sanctuary, but whether or not they decide to work with us, we will be there to protect our sea.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/07/09)

Doctor Mayor Spurs Effort to Heal a Bay

Neighbor towns form alliance to curb illegal fishing



(Photo:A. Sia)

“If we worked together, we would be more effective,” says Lanuza Mayor Algerico Irizari.

Mayor Algerico Irizari of Lanuza, Surigao del Sur, Philippines was certain about what he would first focus on when he assumed office in 1995.

“Small fishers were constantly telling me they were barely catching anything because the commercial fishers were poaching our waters and taking all the fish,” Irizari says.

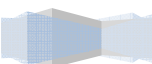
The intruders came mostly from Cantilan, the hub of commercial fishing in Lanuza Bay, which Lanuza administers with six other municipalities.

Irizari, a medical doctor, says he knew he was on the right track when he attended a two-week training course in coastal resource management organized in 1996 by the USAID CRMP. “That training gave me the confidence to pursue my campaign against illegal fishing,” he says.

With most violators coming from outside, Irizari realized that, without the cooperation of the other Lanuza Bay towns, his town would continue to be hounded by poachers. “What the other towns allowed fishers to do in their own waters affected us. If we worked together, we would be more effective.”

With the nearby town of Cortes, Irizari persuaded the other towns to form the Lanuza Bay Development Alliance (LBDA), primarily to harmonize and coordinate a Bay-wide campaign against illegal fishing. Officially created in 2000, the LBDA has survived an attempt by critics to derail its early success at controlling illegal fishing within the Bay. With help from the USAID FISH Project and other partners, it has solidified its position and strengthened its capacity to address various resource use issues.

Irizari, who is serving his last term as mayor, is confident the Alliance will outlast its founders’ terms of office. “The LBDA still faces many challenges, but it has made a difference that is visible. It may not be a perfect model, but it has evolved, it is growing, and I believe it is moving toward its goals.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 11/27/09)



Braving the Frontline



(Photo: A. Sia)

Fish wardens Jose Allan Lavilla (right) and Crisanto Dagongdong (middle) plan to keep up the fight against poachers.

Like any typical fish sanctuary in the Philippines, the Mabua sanctuary in Tandag, Surigao del Sur is community-based and run by a group made up of volunteers trained in the rudiments of resource management and law enforcement. And like their counterparts around the country, the volunteers of Mabua face many risks: Not only must they brave the elements, they must also face down hostile, sometimes openly defiant, fishers who challenge sanctuary rules.

Jose Allan Lavilla, a community leader, recounts the many verbal threats he has received since he started to help guard the sanctuary.

“One time four men even harassed my wife on the street, angrily telling her that they had been arrested and that I was responsible. Thankfully they’re just all talk.”

Crisanto Dagongdong, who heads the people’s organization tasked to manage the sanctuary, tells similar stories. “I’ve have been in many risky situations, mostly while on patrol,” he says, shrugging. “That’s just the way it is. What we do is a naturally risky job.”

His group has learned to manage the risks, Dagongdong claims. “Thanks to the USAID FISH Project, we have had training. And we’re pretty well-organized, so our members are able to respond quickly if called for.”

With support from the FISH Project, they have also undertaken an information-education-communication campaign that has helped increase public understanding of the purpose of the sanctuary and thus promote community acceptance.

After four years of protection, the habitats and fish population inside the sanctuary are showing signs of recovery. But both Dagongdong and Lavilla think the threats will continue for a while yet. Says Dagongdong, “Not everyone agrees with what we are doing here. We hope one day they will, but either way we will do our job. We will continue to keep watch and keep the poachers out.” (A. Sia, *FISH Project, 12/08/09*)

Learning Sustainable Fishing



(Photo: A. Sia)

Jesrel Layno (middle) gave up a lucrative but destructive fishing method for a more sustainable way of fishing.

The sea has been good to Jesrel Layno. “All my five children are in school, thanks largely to what I have earned from fishing,” he says. “But I have not been always good to the sea, so I hope I’m making up for it now.”

Layno used to own a lucrative Danish seine operation employing six people in Lanuza Bay, Surigao del Sur on the eastern Philippine seaboard.

“Back in the 1980s, we would harvest as much as 100 kilos of fish per fishing trip,” he relates.

In the mid-1990s, their yield fell to between 20 and 30 kilos. But prices of fish went up, so they hardly felt the loss and continued to operate.

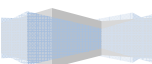
In fact, Layno admits that when the use of Danish seine became illegal under a new law passed in 1998, they defied the law and continued to use the gear.

“I was angry and defiant because I thought the law was unfair,” he explains. “Why would they suddenly declare illegal a business that was perfectly legitimate for so many years?”

He would learn why a few years later. In 2004, the USAID FISH Project assisted the local government in the establishment of a fish sanctuary at Layno’s village. To engage the community in its management, the Project organized training workshops for fishery stakeholders, Layno included. “What I learned from those workshops made me realize that Danish seine was destructive, and that we were overfishing the sea,” he says.

Layno has since switched to a legal, although less efficient, gear. “We’re not catching as much as before, but we’re earning enough, so it’s all right,” he says. “Besides I am confident our fish catch will improve now that we have a fish sanctuary.”

Layno is an active member of the community group that manages the sanctuary. (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/09/09)



Knowledge Creates Change

This man wants to be the change agent his village needs



(Photo: A. Sia)

“The key is to stay the course, no matter the opposition,” says Leonilo Vaz.

Leonilo Vaz never regarded the sea as anything more than a source of fish until he attended a training workshop organized by the USAID FISH Project in 2004.

Although mainly a farmer, Vaz has engaged in some fishing since he was 8 and has seen firsthand the many times fishers used explosives or operated trawls. “I didn’t think much of it,” he says. “They were just ordinary fishers going about their normal business.”

Even when authorities began to crack down on, first, the blast fishers and, later, the trawlers, Vaz hardly cared that many violators seemed to be evading the law. “I really didn’t think they were doing anything wrong, just earning a living,” he says.

His outlook changed dramatically in 2004 after he participated in a resource assessment workshop organized by the USAID FISH Project.

“I was with a group that did the underwater survey. I saw how badly damaged our corals were,” he relates. “Then they told us that many hard coral species grow very slowly – maybe one inch in several years. They also explained what happens to a fish stock when it loses its habitat. And it struck me that I had contributed to the destruction.”

Vaz never used explosives or participated in trawling operations – his gear of choice was the gillnet. But he remembers stepping on corals and even breaking them to prevent damage to his net. “We used to have big beautiful table corals, and I crushed many,” he says. “I didn’t realize they take so long to grow.”

Now Vaz heads a people’s organization tasked to manage a fish sanctuary that the FISH Project helped set up in his hometown. He sees changing fishers’ minds and destructive ways as his primary role, but it has not been easy. “It took two years to convince 30 percent of the fishers to support the sanctuary,” he remarks. “I made enemies out of some friends, including a very dear friend from childhood who wouldn’t talk to me for a year because I refused to intercede for him when he got caught poaching on our sanctuary.”

Still, Vaz points out, “30 percent is a lot more people on our side than when we started, so the job is a bit easier.” It also helps that fish stocks are showing signs of recovery, and fishers are catching more fish.

“The key is to stay the course, no matter the opposition,” Vaz declares. “We will make the change we need, even if we have to do it one person at a time.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/07/09)

Lawmaker Tackles Fisheries Challenge



(Photo: A. Sia)

Reelectionist councilor Alfredo Cantalejo promises to continue to put coastal and fisheries management high in his political agenda.

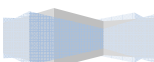
Tandag municipal council member Alfredo Cantalejo has vowed to continue legislative support for fisheries and coastal resource management amid the customary push and pull in local politics.

Cantalejo heads the agriculture committee and is a member of the environment committee of the municipal council of Tandag, a coastal town in the province of Surigao del Sur, east of Mindanao island in the Philippines.

In 2006, with assistance from the USAID FISH Project, he helped put together a comprehensive ordinance for coastal and fisheries management.

The ordinance was approved only in October 2009, nearly three years after it was first drafted. In an interview in 2007, Cantalejo expressed his frustration over the delay in the passage of the law. He said the law faced resistance from some affected fishers, who worried that a number of its provisions would deprive them of their livelihood.

A reelectionist, Cantalejo declared he would continue to support coastal and fisheries management. "As a lawmaker, I will push for the implementation of existing ordinances as well as focus on more legislative action to address critical fisheries and coastal management issues," he said. "My hope is that the executive arm of government will also exercise political will." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 11/26/09)



Environmental Messenger

Training turns college dropout into effective eco-advocate



Photo: R. Mancao, FISH Project

Allan Tello, a school drop-out, is an acknowledged local leader in fisheries management in Tandag town in Surigao del Sur.

Through participatory approaches to fisheries management, USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project has helped uncover the leadership potentials of many individuals, even those who, at first blush, seemed unlikely to play a major role in a fisheries-related program.

Allan “Nonoy” G. Tello is the Municipal Environmental Management Project Officer (MEMPO) of Tandag, one of six LGUs the FISH Project is assisting in Surigao del Sur, Philippines. Before assuming his current post, he served as a messenger in the local government. He held no college degree, and had no training in environmental management.

What he did bring to his job, however, proved valuable: a natural aptitude for communication, a deep thirst for learning and some knowledge of the sea from his ‘part-time job’: fishing.

As a fisher, Nonoy knew enough to realize that the future of his town’s fisheries was imperiled by destructive and indiscriminate human activities.

As MEMPO, he found himself deeply involved in fisheries concerns. Eager to work but unsure about where to begin, he frequented the FISH Project office, where he sponged up all fisheries-related information, knowledge and training the Project could offer.

Soon, Nonoy had a clear idea of the kind of program his town needed. He pushed for an ordinance banning the use of compressors in fishing. He spearheaded the establishment of two marine protected areas and organized the community to manage them. He played a key role in the installation of a coastal management office in his municipality, thus institutionalizing vital coastal and fisheries management functions in the local government.

Nonoy says he takes heart in knowing that other people care as much as he does about the need for fisheries management. “One day, everyone will join the cause, but somebody has to take the first steps. As MEMPO, it is my duty to show the way.” (R Mancao, FISH Project, 01.03.06)

Lawyers in Defense of a Bay

Lanuza Bay towns find ally in lawyers' group



APREDEC's Gerardo Maglinte (left) and Leoderico Avila (right) give out legal and technical advice on coastal management during one of their radio broadcasts. (Photo:A. Sia)

“We’re a catalyst of change and a source of support for the Lanuza Bay municipalities,” says Atty. Maglinte.

The advocacy for coastal resource management in Lanuza Bay is being spearheaded by a group of lawyers belonging to the Advocates for Policy Reform and Development of Caraga (APREDEC). The group provides not only legal assistance but also technical support to local governments as they grapple with the often difficult legal and operational challenges of coastal management.

Although only about three years old, APREDEC traces its beginnings to 2001 when Lanuza Bay, a commercially important fishing ground on the eastern Philippine seaboard, became the center of controversy between commercial fishing operators and municipalities exercising their jurisdiction over municipal waters. It had been three years since the Philippine Fisheries Code was enacted. As a few municipalities around the Bay began enforcing the law’s prohibition on commercial fishing in municipal waters, commercial fishing operators fought back by bringing the enforcers and some local officials to court.

APREDEC founder Gerardo Maglinte represented the local government in the numerous long legal battles that ensued. It was a lonely fight, he relates, “Nearly all the other lawyers in the area were employed by the fishing operators.”

But he also realized that there was an active and growing movement to promote the rights of marginal fishers in the area. Over time, he slowly built a network of like-minded advocates, including a number of his lawyer peers who used to represent commercial fishing interests. They worked together as a loose organization for several years, providing legal and policy advice to local governments that sought it. In 2006, prompted by an opportunity for external funding, they decided to incorporate into what is now known as APREDEC.

From 2006 to 2009, APREDEC worked with the USAID FISH Project to introduce policy reforms that would strengthen the Lanuza Bay Development Alliance, which includes the seven municipalities surrounding the bay. Simultaneously, they beefed up their capability to assist the local governments in the technical aspects of coastal management, including resource assessment, community organizing, law enforcement, and information-education-communication. The group also produces a radio show that discusses current coastal issues.

“We now have in our organization not only lawyers but also community organizers and technical experts,” Maglinte says. “We’ve built a good relationship with local governments, while keeping our independence as a non-governmental organization. This allows us to serve as both a catalyst of change as well as a source of support for the Lanuza Bay municipalities.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/14/09)

Community Organizing Wins Points for Conservation

Lanuza Bay's fish sanctuaries gain approval of a once critical public



Provincial government workers feel vindicated that the fish sanctuaries they helped set up years ago are now finally being appreciated. (Photo:A. Sia)

“Fishers are catching more fish, and I feel all our hard work being rewarded,” says government staff Jose Curada.

Experts had warned that destructive and intensive fishing by both commercial and small-scale fishers had severely reduced the bay's productivity, and this was borne out by complaints from fishers about decreasing fish catches. The sanctuaries were intended to arrest the decline, but this fact was lost on the sanctuaries' critics, who only saw the restrictions being imposed on them.

“We did try to consult with affected communities. Before any sanctuary was installed, we called people to a public hearing,” says Yu.

But with very limited budget, there was not much else they could do. Relates Yu, “Sometimes we had to use our own money to purchase buoys for the sanctuaries.”

Assistance from the USAID FISH Project, which started in 2003, came as a major relief to the government's fisheries managers. “The project really went down to the grassroots and engaged people through community organizing,” observes Yu. “They offered seminars and workshops to train community members in law enforcement and resource management. Then they organized fisherfolk groups and gave them responsibility over the sanctuaries.”

Today, many of Lanuza Bay's fish sanctuaries are being managed and protected by the people that have the biggest stake in them, and they are prospering. Says Jose Curada, a member of Yu's staff at PFARO: “Fishers say that because of the sanctuaries they are catching more fish, which makes me feel all our hard work is now being rewarded. Finally, after many long years, we feel vindicated -- we were on the right track all along.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 12/03/09)

It took at least six years, but many fishing villages around Lanuza Bay in Surigao del Sur have now been won over to the benefits of managing and protecting their own fish sanctuaries, thanks to an effort to engage stakeholders in the management process through community organizing.

Several of the sanctuaries were established in the late 1990s by the Provincial Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Office (PFARO). Recalls PFARO chief Luisito Yu: “We faced strong opposition from the community who accused us of taking away their fishing grounds when their fish production was already shrinking. One mayor even had to ask the military to step in to preserve order.”

Lanuza Bay is a commercially important fishing ground at the eastern Philippine seaboard facing the Pacific Ocean, close to major tuna migration routes.

Renegade Student Turns Eco-warrior

Local government adopts coastal management as centerpiece program



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project

“We visited communities that successfully revitalized their fishery resources. I thought, if others could do it, so could we. And we did,” says Julficar S. Ladjahali, shown here (left) with members of the coastal law enforcement team he heads.

He has a checkered past marked by a bout with drug addiction, but Julficar “Piks” S. Ladjahali is now living life on the high road. Once dubbed a ‘renegade’ by his high school teachers, Piks is now a respected leader in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, where he is leading a campaign to protect the sea through marine sanctuaries and the strict enforcement of national and local fishery laws.

As a young man, Piks took some wrong turns in life. “You don’t have to dig deep into my past to see how much trouble I got myself into,” he says. As a college student in Manila, he got hooked on drugs, spending tuition money to feed his addiction. But although misguided, he was a natural leader, tenacious about the causes he chose to advocate. His high school peers called him “the governor”, even walked out of class to support his protest over the crew cut mandated for the Reserve Officer Training Corps, of which he was provost marshal. “I was going to college in Manila, I wanted the latest hairstyle,” he sheepishly explains.

Ordered home when his parents got wind of his drug use, Piks didn’t finish college, but he did kick his addiction, turned his life around, and put his innate tenacity and leadership skills to good use. Soon he was elected village chief, a position in which he shined, earning him the respect of both voters and elected peers.

And so, when USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project promoted the establishment of a marine sanctuary, all fingers pointed at Piks to lead the initiative. “The site we selected for the sanctuary didn’t include Piks’s village, but everyone said we should include Piks,” FISH Project’s Nur Harun relates. “They said they needed a leader, and that leader was Piks.”

Piks was not totally convinced the sanctuary would work. His mother told him she thought it was a bad idea. “She said it wasn’t fair to ask people to stop fishing. What would they do for food?”

But Pix kept an open mind, and his commitment was sealed through a study tour sponsored by FISH. “We visited communities that successfully revitalized their fishery resources. I thought, if others could do it, so could we. And we did. A few years ago, our nearshore waters were severely depleted; now the fish are back.”

For that, Piks, along with other local officials and fish wardens, rightly deserves the credit. With help from FISH, they designated a portion of their coastal waters as a marine sanctuary, built a guardhouse, and guarded the sanctuary with their lives. Literally: “People say we’re taking away their source of income. We’ve made many enemies; some have threatened to kill us,” reveals Piks.

True to form, he refuses to back down: “We can’t stop now that we’re beginning to reap the benefits of protection. We will continue to do this, and we will continue to do it well. (A. Sia, FISH Project, 06.18.08)

Mother on a Mission



Photo: A Sia, FISH Project

***Village matriarch
Hajja Maimona S. Ladjahali
keeps a watchful eye on her
community's
marine sanctuary.***

Hajja Maimona S. Ladjahali did not want a marine sanctuary in her village, afraid it would deprive many people of food and income. But having seen the benefits the sanctuary has brought to their community in Lagasan, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, she has become a staunch and active supporter.

Ladjahali, along with two of her sons, is an elected official, and her family owns the land the village occupies, so she is in every sense her community's matriarch. People come to her with their concerns, and she has made it her responsibility to try to help them.

When one of her sons told her of a government plan to declare a no-fishing area in her village, she balked, worried about its impact on fishers. "What would people do for food? As it is, there are not enough fish in the sea for everybody," she argued.

Supported by the USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, local government officials, including Ladjahali's sons, proposed the sanctuary as a remedy to the fisheries depletion brought about by decades of destructive and excessive fishing.

Since then, the sanctuary has prospered, fisheries productivity and hook-and-line fishers' incomes have improved, and Ladjahali has had a change of heart. "During low tide, people go hook-and-line fishing close to shore. They don't have to go out in a boat, and they don't have to use dynamite," she observes. "I'm all for the sanctuary now, it's totally won me over."

With her son Julficar taking charge of coastal law enforcement in a sometimes volatile area, Ladjahali understandably has a deep emotional investment in the sanctuary. "I always worry when Julficar is out on patrol, because there are armed men out there who have threatened his life," she says. "Sometimes I wish he doesn't go out as often as he does, but it is necessary, so I have to accept it. The sea is our people's lifeblood, I do what I must do to protect it." (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 09.04.08)

Mayor Leads Town in Conservation

Fish supply increases with protection and management



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project

“At first, I thought ‘What’s the big deal? It’s just fish, there’s plenty more where it comes from,’” Panglima Sugala Mayor Nurbert Sahali (left) says FISH Project Site Manager Nur Harun convinced him that conservation is the way to go.

Nurbert Sahali was not always an advocate of coastal and fish conservation. In 2004, when he first assumed office as mayor of Panglima Sugala, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, he was lukewarm to initiatives by USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project to institute a coastal and fisheries management program in his town.

“At first I thought, ‘What’s the big deal? It’s just fish. There’s plenty more where it comes from.’ We have this huge productive fishing ground. I thought we were doing fine,” he relates. “But Sir (Nur) Harun (FISH Project Tawi-Tawi site manager) was persistent. He and his staff were always there, explaining why it was important that we protected and managed our sea.

Sahali says he started to pay attention to what was happening around him. “I’d visit the market, and I’d hear people quarreling over the high price of fish,” he recalls. “Fish had become scarce. I realized that everything the FISH people told me -- the dynamiting, cyanide fishing, mangrove cutting -- was all there, and it was taking away our source of food.” A study tour sponsored by FISH in 2005 sealed Sahali’s commitment to the conservation cause. He was impressed by the diverse reef life at Apo Island Protected Seascape in Negros Oriental, and the community’s self-sufficiency in managing the sanctuary. He marvelled at how ‘tame’ the fishes were in the Gilutongan Island Fish Sanctuary in Cordova, Cebu. And he rued all the more what his town had lost. “I knew how beautiful and abundant our sea used to be, because I saw it as a child. It was more beautiful than Apo Island, and our fishes were as tame as in Gilutongan.”

He resolved to bring it all back. “As Sir Harun kept telling me, as mayor, I am the key to change,” he says.

Today, Sahali leads a program that includes among its core activities coastal law enforcement, mangrove rehabilitation, and two marine protected areas. He and some local officials and community members have even learned how to dive, to see for themselves how the reefs are faring with the interventions. The improvements they have witnessed have made them all the more committed to their cause.

But no diving is necessary to convince the fishers. Fisherman Iting Kirah saw his catch dwindle from about 30 kilos in the 1990s to a few kilos in the early 2000s. While a FISH Project survey in 2006 shows fish catch improved by only 3.06% from the pre-Project baseline in 2004, Kirah indicates the recovery may be more significant. “The fishes are back,” he reports. “Now my catch is as good as it used to be back in the 1990s.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 04.04.08)

Agriculturist Finds True Calling

Coastal management training leads to a rewarding “career change”



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project

“Thanks to USAID/FISH, my responsibilities are now clearly spelled out,” says Saliadal Salih, shown here in a meeting with members of the municipal fisheries staff.

In 2004, Saliadal A. Salih thought he’d covered all the jobs open to him in government. Back then, he felt government service was just a daily grind he had to put up with to earn a living. Now he is holding a position that requires more of his time and effort, but also excites and fulfills him. “This is more than a job. It’s my true calling,” he declares.

Salih worked as a security officer with the local government of Panglima Sugala, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines from 1983 until he resigned in 1989 to train as an agriculturist under a government-sponsored program. He completed the training four years later and promptly rejoined government as a member of Panglima Sugala’s legislative staff.

Later, Salih became chairman of the Municipal Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Council (MFARMC). As MFARMC chair, he was invited to a series of seminars and trainings organized by USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project. For someone who until then had only had passing interest in the sea, it was an eye-opener. “I understood at once that we needed what the Project offered,” he says. “I’m a consumer like everyone else: I was concerned about how fast fish prices were rising. It affected all of us -- fishers, farmers, government workers.”

A USAID/FISH-sponsored participatory coastal resource assessment (PCRA) gave him his first snorkeling experience: He was dismayed by what he saw. “Too many of the beautiful corals I used to see when I was small were ruined or gone. Not that I paid much attention to those corals before – they were everywhere, so I guess I took them for granted. It was only when I took part in the PCRA and saw how little we had left that I realized we had lost something precious.”

Sponging up every training opportunity and knowledge the Project could offer, Salih was soon designated as Panglima Sugala’s first ever Municipal Fisheries Officer (MFO). Until then, he never had a clear idea what his status and role in government were. “Now I have this position, and thanks to USAID/FISH, my responsibilities are clearly spelled out,” he says. As MFO, he is logging longer – sometimes odd -- hours, but he says it’s worth it. “I got a pay rise, and what’s more, I feel good about being able to do something important. When a fisher tells me his fish catch has increased, his family is eating more, his life is better – that’s the greatest reward of all.”

Clearly, Salih has found his life’s mission. “We will bring back our sea’s bounty,” he vows. (A. Sia, FISH Project, 06.11.08)

Fish Corrals Benefit from Marine Sanctuary

Production, income improve



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project

“Our corrals are yielding more because there are now so many fishes inside and outside the sanctuary.” -- Nasirin “Kah Nas” Taraji, shown here (middle) with other members of his village’s community-based coastal law enforcement team.

When Panglima Sugala Mayor Nurbert Sahali told fish corral owner Nasirin “Kah Nas” Taraji that the local government was setting up a marine sanctuary and Kah Nas had to move his corral to another site, Kah Nas readily complied. “It was an order from authority. I had to obey,” he explains. It took time and forbearance, but Kah Nas, along with others like him, is now being rewarded with bigger harvests and income.

For many years, Kah Nas and other residents in Panglima Sugala in the southern province of Tawi-Tawi, Philippines occupied one of the best sites for fish corrals in the area. They enjoyed relatively good yields, but elsewhere in their town, fish catches were declining at a significant rate, fast enough to alarm local officials.

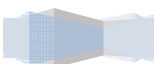
In 2005, hoping to arrest the decline, the local government made plans to set up a marine sanctuary. Assisted by the USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, they determined that the best site for the proposed sanctuary was the same place where the corrals were located, prompting the mayor to ask the operators to vacate the area and move to another location. To encourage compliance, the mayor offered affected operators a monthly stipend of Php1,000, provided they helped to guard the sanctuary. Kah Nas accepted. “I was earning Php10,000 from my corral, but I thought Php1,000 was a fair enough deal. It could help make up for some losses I might incur by moving to another location.”

But things did not go quite as well as Kah Nas hoped. For one, some relatives, unhappy with the new location, angrily confronted him. “They were furious; one pulled out a gun and pointed it at me.”

To help ease tension, FISH organized a mediation meeting attended by the mayor, Kah Nas and his relatives. “The mayor told them this was something that we had to do, that ultimately, it would be in everyone’s interest to cooperate. They were not convinced, but they agreed to not interfere with the sanctuary’s operations,” Kah Nas relates.

Production in the new location also initially proved disappointing, and even Kah Nas began to doubt his decision to support the sanctuary. “My income dipped to Php3,000. I got nervous. I thought, what if production doesn’t go up? What will happen to my family?”

But things did eventually improve. A year after the sanctuary was set up and the corrals were moved, Kah Nas’s earnings had risen to Php12,000, as had the other operators’ incomes.



Getting the Word Out

Training helps a fisher fight illegal fishing



Photo: A Sia, FISH Project

“We would all benefit if we succeeded in restoring the sea to what it was 30 years ago,” Iting Kirah spreads the word from his post in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines.

Iting Kirah, a gillnet fisher for 20 years, watched his catch drop from about 30 kilos when he started fishing to a few kilos in the 1990s. He had an inkling why: Fishers around him were using cyanide, dynamite and whatever efficient but destructive gears they could lay their hands on. “They killed even the small fishes, then left them to rot because nobody would buy them,” he says.

But he felt helpless. “I was affected by what the others were doing, but I didn’t think there was anything I could do,” he explains. “I was afraid to confront them. I wouldn’t have known what to say. I reckoned we were all just trying to earn a living.”

Today, as a member of the community-based coastal law enforcement team of Panglima Sugala town in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, Kirah no longer feels quite so helpless. And no longer would he stand idly by and allow others to continue to squander the resources that he and many others in his community depend on.

Kirah is one of 23 men employed by the local government to guard one of Panglima Sugala’s two marine sanctuaries. He is on regular duty watching the sanctuary from a guardhouse his community built with assistance from the USAID’s Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project. He has had training, mainly from FISH, and now faces violators in an assured manner. “I explain to them why they should stop, that they could go to jail, but also that we would all benefit if we succeeded in restoring our sea to what it was 30 years ago,” he says. “And we’re spreading the word to other villages, so that they too would know the importance of having a marine sanctuary.”

Kirah himself is his own proof of the value of protection. “On a good day, I now bring home as much as 60 kilos of fish,” he says. (A. Sia, *FISH Project*, 08.27.08)

New Boats Boost Drive vs Illegal Fishing



Photo: A Sia, FISH Project

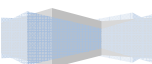
Shown here shortly after they were built, these boats are now on patrol in the waters of Tawi-Tawi.

New patrol boats have been added to the coastal law enforcement assets in four Philippine provinces as part of a U.S. assistance package through the Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project. Custom-made by local boatbuilders to local sea conditions, they are operated and maintained by the local government and community organizations.

Now in its 5th year of a 7-year term, the FISH Project works with the Philippine government at both national and local levels to improve governance for coastal and fisheries management.

In 2006, the Project reported a 1.53% overall average increase in fish stocks in its four sites compared to baseline levels in 2004, thanks largely to improved protection of fish stocks and habitats through MPAs and an intensified drive against illegal fishing.

The improvement was particularly significant in and around marine protected areas, where fish abundance rose by an average of 4.78% and species richness (the number of species observed in every 500sqm of area surveyed) jumped 52.6% overall, clear indications that fish stocks are beginning to recover (A. Sia, FISH Project, 04.03.08)



Keeping the Peace



Photo: Roger Irlis, FISH Project

These men were divided on the issue of setting up a marine sanctuary. Here, they pray together for a peaceful end to their conflict.

The strategy of restoring the natural productivity of marine resources by prohibiting or limiting access to them is well-proven and has become widely accepted in the Philippines. But setting up a marine sanctuary can still present difficult challenges.

In 2005, an effort by the local government of Panglima Sugala, Tawi-Tawi to set up a marine sanctuary almost led to a shootout between those that supported the initiative and those that opposed it. To ease the potentially explosive situation, USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, which advocated the sanctuary, arranged a mediation meeting between members of the opposing camps.

Not everyone left the meeting completely sold on the sanctuary, but all parties agreed to exercise restraint and allow the initiative to continue without further trouble. The benefits of protection have since become evident in higher fish catches and incomes for many stakeholders. Today, the sanctuary has become a showcase of community cooperation, guarded and protected by the community's men and women, young and old alike. (A. Sia/FISH Project, 08.14.08)

Fisher Banks on Marine Sanctuary

Improved fish catch gives fisher hope for a better future



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project

“If we continue to protect our sea, our lives can only get better,” says hook-and-line fisher Alzendri A. Uji (above, right), who works without pay as a volunteer fish warden in the island town of Simunul, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines.

Alzendri A. Uji has never been as upbeat about the future as he is now. A hook-and-line fisher, he is used to catching precious little fish, barely enough to feed his family. But after the USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project helped his community set up a marine sanctuary, he saw his catch begin to improve. “Now I bring home 70% more fish than I used to, and sometimes twice as much,” he says.

Uji moved to Simunul, an island municipality in the southern Philippine province of Tawi-Tawi, in 1994. Newly married at 21, he thought life would be better there than what it was in his old home on nearby Tandubas Island, where catching fish by hook-and-line had become uncertain because of rampant dynamite fishing. But his life barely improved.

“There was dynamite fishing here, too. It was not nearly as bad as what I saw at Tandubas, but that didn't help me catch more fish,” he says. “On an odd day, I'd enjoy a good harvest, but that didn't happen often enough.”

In 2007, FISH offered to help Uji's village set up a marine sanctuary. “They came here and explained how we could benefit from protecting our sea. Immediately, I understood what they meant, and I volunteered to help,” he relates. “FISH then arranged for some of us to visit a successful sanctuary. I experienced, for the first time in my life, feeding fish right out of my hand. I thought, we needed this; this was something we could also have.”

Today, Uji takes turns with other members of the local sea patrol to guard the sanctuary. He says the job has become more difficult now that “there are so many big fishes in the sanctuary. We've seen them, but other people from other villages have also seen them, and they've been trying to get in and have those fishes for themselves. We cannot and will never allow that to happen.”

Working without pay, Uji says his involvement in the sanctuary has been “a sacrifice.”

“But it's been worth it,” he asserts. “My catch has improved, and many others here say they are catching bigger and better quality fish. If we continue to guard the sanctuary and protect our sea, our lives can only get better.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 08.28.08)

External Aid Spurs Coastal Governance

Institutionalization of coastal management begins



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project
Abdelnasser Gregana is Simunul's first agriculture and fisheries officer. The creation of the Municipal Agriculture and Fisheries Office is a key step to institutionalizing CRM.

Positive results from current interventions help promote wider community support for coastal management.

Challenge

With its economy supported by remittances from its seamen and overseas workers, Simunul town in the Philippine province of Tawi-Tawi is relatively less resource-dependent than many of its neighbors. But even here, there is a significant fishery industry composed of resident and migrant fishers. And as elsewhere, resource degradation caused by overfishing and habitat destruction have severely affected fishers' incomes. The government recognized the gravity of the fishery situation, but its initial efforts at addressing the problem were hampered by highly partisan local politics. People, especially those supporting other political parties, would often question the government's agenda, suspicious that implementors had an ulterior political motive. Many programs needing community acceptance and participation, such as coastal resource management (CRM), were implemented only in bursts and spurts, as the lack of popular support dampened any interest officials might have to adopt CRM as a regular program of government.

Initiative

The USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project provided a nonpartisan setting that helped the local government introduce key CRM measures to local communities. As an "outsider," FISH presented an argument for CRM independent of the local political dynamic, one that community leaders readily accepted. With FISH project staff presenting the technical and scientific reasons for habitat protection, for example, the local government secured the participation of at least two communities in the management of Simunul's two marine sanctuaries.

Residents helped guard the sanctuary, and even provided free labor for the construction of guardhouses. Positive results from such initial interventions then encouraged local officials to pursue other CRM measures, and begin the institutionalization of the CRM process in the local government system.

Results

FISH developed the Simunul government's capacities in key CRM areas such as coastal law enforcement, habitat protection, legislation, and fishery registration and licensing. The government's campaign against illegal fishing, as well as the communities' effective enforcement of their sanctuaries, helped restore fish stocks, increase fish catches in nearby waters and promote wider community support for CRM. With the community's involvement encouraged from the early stages of implementation, partisanship has become a peripheral issue, improving prospects for the sustainability of current initiatives. FISH also helped create the local government's municipal agriculture and fisheries office to provide program continuity, thus laying the groundwork for the full institutionalization of the CRM process. (A. Sia, FISH Project, 08.17.08)

Farming Village Takes Charge of their Sea

**Fish stocks increase
with round-the-clock protection**



Photo: A. Sia, FISH Project
Members of the local marine sanctuary management council show local officials and FISH Project staff to the Maruwa Marine Sanctuary.

As recently as two years ago, the largely farming community of Maruwa was only vaguely concerned about how badly degraded their coastal resources had become. Today, after the USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project convinced them to set up a marine sanctuary, they have become committed guardians of the sea.

Maruwa is a coastal village of about a thousand in the island municipality of Simunul, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines. Families here rely mostly on agriculture, as well as the four S's (Sabah, Saudi, seamen, seaweeds) that form the backbone of Simunul's economy. But the community has not been spared the scourge of dynamite, cyanide and other destructive fishing, perpetrated in their coastal waters mostly by migrant fishers from nearby villages. Long-time residents remember a time "many years ago" when their waters teemed with fish. "But then we had red tide, and then dynamite and cyanide fishing, and before we knew it, fish became scarce," Abdilnaser H. Sahibin relates.

**"Protecting our
future is not just the
fishers' job."**

Sahibin, a member of the local marine sanctuary management council, is a farmer. "Some illegal fishers have told me I should stick to farming and not get involved in something I know nothing about," he says.

"But I don't have to be a fisher to know that destructive fishing is killing our sea. This is our community. I care about what's happening here now and how it will affect our future. Protecting our future is not just the fishers' job."

"Five years down the road, this sanctuary will be something we can be truly proud of," declares another council member Munar Abdulmuhmin, a government employee who moved to Simunul two years ago. "I know we're into something good, I've certainly never seen this many fish here before."

Emile Hajim, a village official, admits their job has become more difficult now that fishers know there are more fish in Maruwa's waters. "But even illegal fishers are beginning to realize that this is all for their own good. I know a few people who were caught using dynamite and made to attend our seminars. They have not gone back to dynamite fishing – they don't really have to, now that they're catching more fish. Instead they're helping us guard the sanctuary." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 08/28/08)

Fostering the Koranic View of Fishing



Photo: A Sia, FISH Project

Koran experts, among them (from left) Aleem Abdulwahid Inju and Haidith Astarani, speak up against destructive fishing.

In many places, blast fishing and other forms of destructive fishing have existed for so long they have become part of the norm, socially acceptable and difficult to stamp out. In Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, the religious sector has taken a stand against destructive fishing, thus providing a counterpoint against the common argument that the practice, while often illegal, is not necessarily morally wrong.

With assistance from the USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, the Supreme Council for Islamic Preaching and Guidance, Inc. (SCIPGI), a group of shariah (religious) lawyers and Koran experts, has formulated a *fatwa* (Islamic religious ruling) on illegal fishing based on the Koran and Hadith.

The fatwa contains four "instructions" dealing specifically with blast fishing, cyanide fishing, the harvesting of juvenile fishes, and the protection and conservation of marine habitats.

Haidith A. Astarani, one of 10 SCIPGI members who drafted the *fatwa*, observes, "Many people used to believe that there was nothing morally wrong about using dynamite and cyanide for fishing, even if it was prohibited under Philippine law. Now the *fatwa* says dynamite fishing and cyanide fishing are not only illegal acts, they are also immoral. It is now clearer to people that these things are not right in the eyes of our faith."

Astarani says the *fatwa* has helped reduce illegal fishing through voluntary compliance. "I think it has helped promote acceptance of the law by those who might otherwise choose to ignore it because they don't see anything wrong in the things that the law defines as illegal," he says.

Abdelnasser A. Gregana, the fisheries officer of the island town of Simunul, agrees. "Getting people to cooperate used to be very difficult," he relates. "Then the *fatwa* came out, and suddenly it seemed like fishers were accepting what we were saying more readily, maybe because they were hearing more and more people telling them the same thing, that destructive fishing is wrong, and marine conservation is right. For us who've been working so hard on this, the *fatwa* is heaven-sent." (A. Sia, FISH Project, 09.04.08)

Cooperation Gets the Job Done



Photo: A Sia, FISH Project

A fisher gets timely help from Faisal Nahul (left) and Evelyn Martinez (right) of the Tawi-Tawi provincial fisheries office.

With limited manpower and funding, the Provincial Fisheries Office (PFO) of the southern Philippine province of Tawi-Tawi was hard-pressed to deliver vital coastal resource management (CRM) services to its target communities. Until recently that is, when the PFO began to collaborate more closely with local government units to enable the latter to more effectively assume their legal mandate as front-line coastal managers.

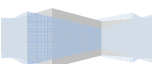
Assisted by the USAID's Fisheries Improved for Sustainable Harvest (FISH) Project, the PFO has actively redefined its operations to allow it to focus more strongly on building local government capacities in CRM. All for the better, says acting provincial officer Faisal Nahul.

“There are only 14 of us, and there's more than 11,000 square kms of municipal waters across the Tawi-Tawi archipelago,” he says. “With our limited resources, no CRM will ever happen without the local governments' involvement.”

Under a regional fisheries law passed in 1999, local governments in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao hold the primary responsibility for managing marine waters up to 12km from the shoreline. The law also mandates the fisheries bureau, through its PFOs, to build the local governments' CRM capacities. But until 2006, the law was deficient, lacking the implementing guidelines required for budgetary allocation and implementation.

“For seven years, we could not implement the law. Thankfully, with help from FISH, our regional office took charge of drawing up the guidelines,” Nahul relates. “Now, our role in capacity-building is clearly spelled out, we have a budget – albeit meager -- to do it, and the local governments understand and are able to carry out their mandate better.”

Evelyn Martinez, a member of Nahul's staff, is elated the local governments are firmly on board the CRM wagon. “I used to feel that we didn't have much to show for all the hard work we put in fisheries development,” she says. “Now I feel we're truly making progress.” (A. Sia, FISH Project, 09/04/08)





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