

SSME Fisheries Management Program: Conserving biodiversity through sustainable fisheries management

A wealth of fisheries

The outstanding biodiversity of the Sulu-Sulawesi Marine Ecoregion (SSME) translates quite easily and logically into high productivity. It is not surprising that the SSME is, hence, one of the world's most abundant fishing grounds. Highly prized finfish—the Napoleon wrasse, groupers, snappers, tunas, and billfishes—and an exotic array of invertebrates—shrimps, crabs, lobsters, squids, and octopuses—are harvested from its productive habitats like coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass beds, soft seabeds, and oceanic waters. It is estimated that between 300–400 species of fishes and invertebrates are regularly caught and traded in the SSME.

SSME fisheries feed and provide livelihood to the 35 million people spread along shores that span three countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. These countries also benefit from the foreign exchange that the fisheries fuel, supporting the drive towards economic development. With average landings of 2.3 million tons annually, valued at about US\$1 billion, SSME fisheries are far from being small-fry contributors to regional growth.

One million people depend directly on the fisheries as a main income source, and in Indonesia and the Philippines, this number is predominated by small-scale fishing that use traditional fishing gear: hook-and-line and traps are common. In Malaysia, medium- to large-scale fishing makes use of seines and trawls and mechanized crafts.

Fisheries in a sea of threats

And yet the sword is double-edged: the bounty upon which the region rests is also the reason for the complex environmental problems that plague it.

Habitat destruction, brought about by widespread use of destructive fishing methods, and over-harvesting are fast depleting resources that, despite their abundance, are not limitless. Destructive

fishing practices, for example, the use of explosives and noxious substances like cyanide, reduce live coral and destroy reefs. Aquaculture development, as in the Philippines, has reduced mangrove stands to only 36% of the 1900 levels.

Telltale signs that something is not right in the ecosystem are already present: declines in catch even with increases in fishing effort, a proliferation of invertebrates in the catch suggesting a reduction in the number of commercial fishes that feed on these invertebrates, decreases in the sizes of fish caught, and the disappearance of certain fish species from the fishing grounds. In addition, an Asian Development Bank (ADB) study shows a drop of 90% in the trawlable biomass of some traditional fishing areas of the Philippines, indicating a massive downtrend of fisheries production. Similar trends in varying degrees are noted all over the region.

Over-harvesting, which is taking more than what the populations could naturally renew, is brought about by weak fishery management regimes, often through ineffective policies or poor enforcement of fishery laws, or both.



As a consequence, substantially reduced incomes, and real threats to food security have made poverty a compelling issue for the nations of the SSME. Six percent of fishers in East Kalimantan, 11% in Sulawesi, Indonesia and 42.3% in the Philippines live below the poverty line.

The severity of the problem has, in turn, pressed fishers even more to resort to the “quick fix” offered by destructive fishing practices. And the vicious cycle continues.

Reversing the loss of biodiversity

The way one country manages its environment and fishery resources will inevitably affect more than the communities and waters inside its geographical borders. For this reason, the three nations of the SSME recognize a common desire to work together to address fisheries issues and concerns. Stakeholders from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines met during the first regional workshop held in Manado, Indonesia on April 30 to May 3, 2002 to formulate the SSME Fisheries Management Program. During the three-day workshop, the stakeholders reviewed the status and management of their fisheries, pressing issues were identified and validated, and a framework strategy earlier drafted by a core team of stakeholders was ratified. In the end, they formulated the program objectives which are to (a) improve the status and management of fishery resources in critical sites and

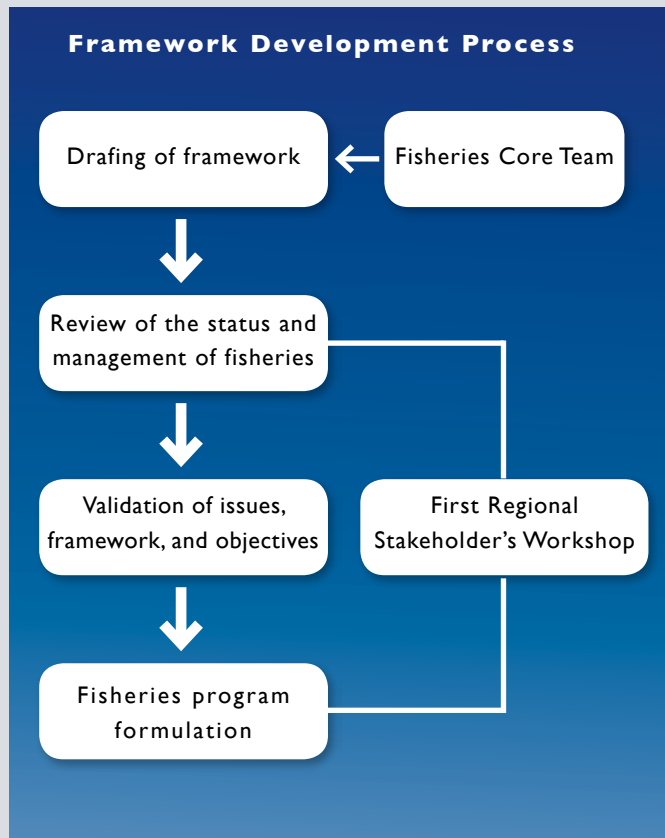
marine protected areas; (b) enable stakeholders to build their capacity for fisheries management (c) stop illegal, unreported, unregulated, and destructive fishing; (d) develop and operate a mechanism to address transboundary fisheries issues in the SSME;

(e) develop financing mechanisms for sustainable conservation; (f) increase public awareness; and (g) generate and use information for better management of fisheries and their habitats. In this light, the concerted fisheries program was formulated.

The tasks under the SSME Fisheries Management Program (FMP) include policy review and formulation, advocacy, information/ education campaigns, and monitoring and evaluation. The development and implementation of management initiatives shall be at the local sites and coordinated at country levels. Through constant liaison among the three countries there shall also be coordination at the ecoregion level. It is hoped that with the strengthening of fisheries

management in all levels—local, national, ecoregional, and international—future generations will be left with bountiful resources that are sustainable through time.

The implementation of the program addresses one of the main objectives of the Ecoregion Conservation Plan (ECP), which is to improve the condition and management of fishery resources in the SSME. ■



Actions on the ground

The SSME Fisheries Management Program (FMP) has identified the Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), a four-nation, public-private sector regional trade body inaugurated in March 1994, as a platform to pursue its objectives. Through its Working Group on Fisheries Cooperation (WGFC), the FMP has been recognized by the BIMP-EAGA as one of its priority projects during its 9th Senior Officials Meeting in Manado, Indonesia in August 2002.