

Abstract ID – 1512

Theme 3: Coastal governance
Invited speaker

The 2nd International Symposium on
Integrated Coastal Zone Management
Arendal, Norway
3 – 7 July 2011

Small-scale fisheries: an evaluation of their role in the coastal zones of the world

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Abstract

With the deployment of the first steam-powered trawlers along the English coast in the late 1880s, a mode of fishing emerged which relies on non-renewable fossil energy to exploit a renewable resource. In the short-term, industrial fisheries simply had to in 'win' in their competition with small-scale fisheries, as they could deploy concentrated capital and fishing power to generate massive catches. Indeed, from the 1950s to the late 1980s, the fishing world was consumed by the exploits of industrial fishing which, at the end of this period, spanned the globe. Almost everyone forgot small-scale fisheries, except for a few maritime anthropologists, who often emphasized quaint features of the lives of fisher folks, rather than their core activity. Fisheries scientists also tended to avoid small-scale fisheries, whose catch, even when known, contains little of the detailed per-species information required for population dynamics models. Moreover, in many countries, the bureaucracy could not be bothered with the logistical difficulties in monitoring small-scale fisheries, and thus their catch are not reported to the FAO. As a result, its databases vastly underestimate the contribution of small-scale fisheries to the global catch. But then, throughout the 1990s, came the realization that industrial fisheries have serious sustainability issues. Some industrial fisheries are managed well, notably in Norway. But in much of the world, the very size of industrial fleets translates into political power often exceeding that of coastal states, and they abuse this power. And, in addition to destroying habitats, as in the case of trawlers, they also regularly crash the stocks they depend on. They then move further offshore, into deeper waters and further south because, at least in developed countries, they are subsidized, and thus escape the economic consequence of their activities. However, these fleets cannot expand any more, and they are squeezed by increased fuel costs; hence the widespread crisis of fisheries. Thus, it is high time to recall that there is an alternative: small-scale fisheries. Because small-scale fishers by definition live close to their fishing grounds, and depend on the resource therein, they can be (re-)connected, if need be, with the idea of caring for the resources. This, combined with the obvious advantage of adjacency (short sailing time, and hence limited fuel consumption, if fuel is used), provides a major reason why small-scale fisheries have the potential of becoming the fisheries of the future, both in developed and in developing countries. This theme will be elaborated upon, following an attempt to properly quantify the global catch of small scale fisheries, based on data assembled by the Sea Around Us project.