

Comments on

Indonesian Fishing in Australian Waters: Has the problem been solved?

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For this forum, I believe that the pertinent question to ask is: what problem has been solved and whose problem is it? Let me begin by differentiating between problems relating to Indonesian fishing in Australian waters.

The first problem has to do with illegal fishing – mainly shark-fishing – by Indonesian fishermen in Australian waters; this fishing is carried out by a variety of motorized vessels that originate from various ports along the southeastern arc of the Indonesian archipelago from the island of Rote to Irian Jaya.¹

The second problem has to do with legal fishing – mainly *trepang* (sea-slug) gathering – by Indonesian sailing-*perahu* fishermen on and around reefs within an area designated by the 1974 Memorandum of Understanding between Indonesia and Australia. Originally much of this gathering centred on Ashmore Reef and Cartier Islet but when these areas were designated as nature reserves, efforts by Indonesian fishermen shifted to Seringapatam and Scott Reefs, further to the south. Both of these reefs are still within the MOU Box area. A certain amount of shark-fishing continues to be done by *perahu* fishermen throughout the MOU Box area with a tendency now to concentrate around Browse Island. Most of this legal fishing is carried out by *perahu* from the island of Rote.

Both legal and illegal fishing raise questions about long-term sustainability for shark as well as for *trepang* in Australian waters and beyond. And behind this question of sustainability lurks the larger question of the sustainability of fishing in the Arafura and Timor Seas and the general welfare and future livelihood of the fishing populations of eastern Indonesia.

In the case of illegal shark fishing, the last three years has seen a significant reduction. Coordinated, systematic operations by the Navy, Customs and Coastwatch have resulted in the apprehension of a large number of illegal vessels of all kinds. The curtailment of illegal shark fishing has been dramatic. At its height, in October 2004, there were as many as 400 small motorized boats, known as *bodi*, in the port of Pepela on Rote that made several incursions a month into Australian waters to fish for shark, many of them sailing well south of the MOU Box area. Now, at best, there are some 20 *bodi* that continue to fish illegally in Australian waters.

¹Large Indonesian fishing vessels, equipped with radar and ice-storage capacities, that target red snapper are also involved in illegal fishing but my concern here is with small-boat fishing by local fishermen from eastern Indonesia rather than the organized commercial fleets directed from Java.

In the case of legal *trepang* gathering, the number of *perahu* has remained roughly constant, or has possibly increased slightly, over the past five years. Since Ashmore and Cartier are now closed, this has meant a build-up of *perahu* at Scott Reef. This year there were more than 80 *perahu* at Scott Reef from July to October, which is the season for *trepang*-gathering.

Each *perahu* has about eight crew members, all of whom spend much of the late afternoon and evening searching for *trepang*. With this number of boats, the stock of *trepang* is under heavy pressure. It is evident to all the fishermen that no *perahu* this year will be able to gather what some *perahu* managed to gather last year. This downward trend has been clearly evident for the past several years. What continues to impel these fishermen is a lack of alternative livelihood possibilities and the fact that as valuable varieties of *trepang* become scarcer, their price increases. Until now, price increases appear to have compensated somewhat for reduced catches.

Whose problem has therefore been solved?

- 1) Certainly illegal fishing has been substantially curtailed but the evidence would suggest that if Australian surveillance and apprehension were to be lessened, it would take no more than a year or two for illegal shark fishing to re-establish itself.
- 2) The problem of maintaining legal *trepang* gathering on reefs in the MOU Box looms large. It is only a question of time – probably no more than a few years – before stocks at Scott Reef are all but exhausted. Then what?
- 3) The major problem is what happens to fishing in eastern Indonesia, an area that has now become so over-fished, particularly by fleets of large commercial vessels – many of them of foreign origin – that there is little left for small-scale local fishermen.
- 4) The fishermen throughout eastern Indonesia are already suffering from the loss of fishing opportunities in their own waters but in the near future, all of the populations of eastern Indonesia will be affected by the decline in fish stocks and thus in a critically important source of their daily diet.