Comments on

Indonesian Fishing in Australian Waters: Has the Problem Been Solved?

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Recent government media releases have highlighted the ‘positive outcomes’ of increased enforcement and surveillance measures to deal with illegal fishing in northern Australian waters. Reports have stated a 90% decrease in sightings from 2006 and a substantial drop in actual apprehensions to such an extent that some relocation of the $388 million dollars designated to tackle the problem may be necessary. Other collaborative activities such as a Joint Public Information Campaign in Indonesia, and support for Indigenous ranger programmes have also contributed to this positive response. It would appear that in the short term, the ‘problem’ has been solved.

However, these approaches to address the complex arena of illegal Indonesian fishing activity in the Australian Fishing Zone have done little to address the outstanding issues concerning both legal and illegal fishing activities in the area covered by the 1974 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Australia and Indonesia. This agreement regulates traditional Indonesian fishing activity in a designated area in Timor Sea.

The Bajo who originate from villages of Mola and Mantigola in Tukang Besi Islands (WAKATOBI\(^1\)), Southeast Sulawesi as well as Bajo from these communities who have settled in the village of Pepela on Rote Island are one group of ‘traditional’ fishermen who have a demonstrated history of activity in what are now Australian waters, including in and around the area covered by the MOU, since the early 1900s.

Despite a documented history of activity, their rights have never been specifically recognised. The 1974 MOU was a goodwill attempt to recognise the long standing interests Indonesian fishermen had in the northern Australian region and to provide ongoing access for Indonesian fishermen in waters that came under Australian control. Unfortunately it has largely failed to provide for marine resource management, recognition of fishing rights for specific groups and in stopping illegal activity outside the permitted areas. The MOU was largely designed to accommodate groups of fishermen from villages on Rote and from the islands of Madura and Raas targeting sedentary species at offshore reefs and islands. The MOU ‘box’ area agreed to in 1989 did not accommodate most of the traditional Bajo shark fishing grounds. In general, the most productive shark fishing grounds are found outside the MOU box.

In pursuing their livelihood, continuing illegal Bajo fishing activity occurs as a direct result of the ineffectiveness of the 1974 MOU, as well as social and economic consequences resulting from the apprehension, and confiscation of boats, equipment and catch. The Bajo have become increasingly marginalised to the point that their only option

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\(^1\) WAKATOBI is an acronym for the four main islands of Wanci, Kaledupa, Tomia and Binongko in the Tukang Besi island chain in Southeast Sulawesi.
has been to fish illegally inside Australian waters.

In the past illegal activity undertaken in sail powered boats was to some extent tolerated (for example in 1994 less than 10% of the Bajo fleet were apprehended – around 7 boats). In recent years increasing numbers of their boats, both sail powered *perahu lambo* and smaller motorised boats called ‘*bodi*’ have been apprehended. It is unclear the exact numbers of Bajo boats apprehended and destroyed for fishing illegally inside the AFZ but it is certainly in the vicinity of hundreds in the last two years alone.

What impact has this had? On a recent visit to Pepela and the Bajo settlement, Tanjung Pasir, in July this year, it was clear that policy responses have had a dramatic impact. Once a thriving settlement, with hundreds of families, crew and boats, the village was home to only a few fishermen and their families. Without boats, most Bajo have returned to their home islands in WAKATOBIN. In one sense the surveillance, compliance and enforcement arrangements have had the desired effect by curtailing illegal activity, now there are few boats left to burn. Those Bajo remaining in Pepela acknowledged they had been fishing illegally in Australian waters, but had done so in an attempt to continue their traditional livelihood activity.

However, over the last 10 years there was been ongoing development of the WAKATOBIN National Marine Park. The Park, declared in 1996 encompasses all islands and reefs in the region and is the second largest in Indonesia (3.4 million acres). The boundaries of the Park correspond with the recently established Kabupaten of WAKATOBIN. The creation of the park is empowered by many actors including international conservation and donor agencies (with their biodiversity based agenda and substantial funding resources), regional government institutions and western-driver tourism entities and non-Bajo communities. The development of a detailed draft management plan is currently under implementation. The plan includes ‘no take’ zones which fall largely within the traditional maritime domains of the Bajo. The Bajo have largely been disposed and marginalised in the participatory consultation and decision-making processes. But, it is the Bajo who are the most dependent on these resources and have the greatest claim to their access through long standing dependency.

The Bajo of Mola, Mantigola and Pepela have become refugees in their own seas, with increasingly limited access to their traditional sources of livelihood. This has in turn stimulated further movement of Bajo around the Indonesian archipelago and beyond to seek a living.

While the challenges for developing alternative livelihoods for a highly mobile socially networked maritime ethnic group such as the Bajo are immense, more can be done to solve the problem for Bajo fishermen and their families. Over the last 15-20 years more than 30 projects and studies relating to illegal and legal fishing the AFZ have been implemented. Only three of these relate specifically to consideration of socio-economic issues of traditional fishermen accessing the MOU area and developing alternative livelihoods. And if we compare the investment in funds for biophysical research and surveillance and enforcement, the investment in understanding cultural and socio-
economic conditions for developing alternative or supplementary livelihoods is very low. Recent bilateral fisheries and marine management discussions between Australia and Indonesia in March of this year agreed to continue to identify support for alternative livelihoods for traditional fishermen within the MOU box. The Bajo communities from WAKATOKI must be recognised as part of this group and innovative approaches trailed.