

## Is 'deep sea fishing' the silver bullet?

On September 8, the Tamil Nadu Fisheries University (TNFU) organised a one-day workshop in Chennai on deep sea fishing, the aim being to promote deep sea fishing as an alternative to trawling in the Palk Bay. Proponents of deep sea fishing argue that the lure of better catch in far-off seas and avoiding the risks of cross-border fishing in Sri Lankan waters will ensure its success. But is it as simple as that?

Deep sea fishing has always been an integral part of the country's Blue Revolution vision to exploit fishing resources to the maximum within the 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The present plan in the Palk Bay is to extract 2,000 trawlers from the bay and replace them with deep sea vessels that fish in the Bay of Bengal and Gulf of Mannar. The time period for this transition is three years (2017-2020), with 500 boats to be replaced in the first year alone. The Central and Tamil Nadu governments have committed 800 crore and 320 crore, respectively, to the plan. Each vessel will be fitted for tuna long-lining and/or gillnetting, and have a unit cost of 80 lakh. Of this unit cost, trawl owners have to only pay 8 lakh upfront and 16 lakh through a loan from the Pandyan Grama Bank. The balance 56 lakh will be a subsidy shared by the State and Central governments.

The Palk Bay fishing conflict has figured prominently in high-level meetings between India and Sri Lanka. The origins of the conflict are complex and it is difficult to resolve. The main issue is what to do with the oversized fleet of Tamil Nadu trawlers that fish regularly in Sri Lankan waters, often damaging the boats and gear of small-scale Tamil fishers from the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government has not only passed a legislation banning trawling but its navy has also been vigilantly patrolling the International Maritime Boundary Line, 'capturing' Indian trawl boats and fishers.

The plan (as foreseen in G.O. (Ms) 139 (Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries Department, Tamil Nadu, July 14, 2017) is to remove as many trawl vessels from the Palk Bay as possible. Prospective beneficiaries of the deep sea fishing project should possess a registered, seaworthy trawl vessel of over 12m in length that must be scrapped or disposed of outside the Palk Bay. The disposed vessel should also have been physically verified. Equally important, new replacement tuna long liner boats cannot trawl or operate in the Palk Bay. The government is now creating a new deep sea fishing harbour at Mookaiyur, located just south of the Palk Bay in the Gulf of Mannar, where many of these vessels are likely to be berthed. Priority is to be given to owners who have had their boats apprehended or damaged in Sri Lanka. Beneficiaries are not allowed to sell their boats within five years of obtaining them though it is unclear how that will be enforced.

Administrators and scientists alike have raised questions. First, are there sufficient stocks of fish in the adjacent waters of the Bay of Bengal and Gulf of Mannar to make deep sea fishing economically viable for a large and new fleet of vessels? And do Palk Bay trawl fishers, who are used to one-day fishing, have sufficient skills and an interest for deep sea fishing?

The Indian government report of the Working Group for Revalidating the Potential of Fishery Resources in the Indian EEZ suggests that oceanic regions have a maximum potential yield of 208,000 tonnes. Importantly, however, while the report highlights that oceanic stocks are not fully exploited, it does not state where the remaining oceanic stocks in the Indian Ocean exist nor whether this might be in the Bay of Bengal or the Gulf of Mannar. Moreover, the report warns that oceanic resources are transboundary and hence are targeted by a number of other countries too.

In fairness, the authorities have taken note of training needs and are setting up special facilities in collaboration with the TNFU and the Central Institute of Fisheries Nautical and Engineering

Training. Applicant trawl owners also expect to employ a few specialised workers from the operational deep sea fishing fleet of Thoothoor, at least for the initial period of operation. The question of what will become of trawl crews remains largely unaddressed, potentially jeopardising the local economy of the region.

For trawl fishers, the main concern is whether deep sea fishing is a sound investment or not. Trawl owners are also either rich or have a hand-to-mouth existence. Some fishermen have expressed doubts about the high operational costs of deep sea fishing and the loan repayment schedule imposed by the Pandyan Grama Bank. Therefore, they have been pressurising the government to minimise the applicants' financial contribution.

Whether deep sea fishing will reduce the Palk Bay fishing conflict depends entirely on the downsizing of the existing trawl fleet. On paper, the necessary safeguards are in place: participant trawl owners have to surrender their boats while deep sea fishing vessels will not be allowed into the Palk Bay. But rules are not always followed. The government will have to ensure that remaining vessels are not upgraded in size or engine horsepower, as many trawl owners in the Palk Bay have been increasing their engine capacities surreptitiously, well beyond legal limits.

Equally of concern is the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department's capacity to monitor, control and carry out surveillance (MCS) of the process of decommissioning. Regulations have always existed but have rarely been implemented judiciously. The deep sea vision, moreover, is monomaniacal with no other solutions to trawling offered. The Palk Bay conflict requires a multi-dimensional approach. Various other solutions such as buy-backs, alternative livelihoods and skill development need to be rolled out with a simultaneous focus on a strong MCS system. Only then can this intransigent fishing conflict be finally resolved.

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