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Our Collective Responsibility



Plenty of Fish in the Sea

RARE program seeks to restore habitat

By Meera Rajagopalan

Philippines is a hotspot of biodiversity. When the country's marine ecosystems were being depleted, the Fish Forever program stepped in to create sustainable fishing practices. It's the story of how communities can restore the ecosystems that provide their livelihood, if they work together.

Twelve chairpersons of the Barangay Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Council of the MIMAROPA region of Philippines stand around a table, desperately collecting plastic fish using tongs, spoons and shovels. They have just thirty seconds to report their catch to the "Fisheries Manager." They notice the presence of a plastic fishing boat, representing a commercial boat, and most of them protest its presence, but no one moves to stop it. They fish as much as they can, avoiding a portion of the table marked out as the Marine Protected Area (MPA). When the clock runs out, the Fisheries Manager asks them what could have been different, and they now express their dissatisfaction at the commercial boat and suggest someone act as law enforcement to stop it. They

also recommend a new rule: ban on juvenile catch. The waters, i.e., the table, are opened for fishing, and the chairpersons resume fishing. Two of them net juvenile fish, despite the restrictions and are promptly fined for the same. Another is charged with the duty of stopping the commercial boat. At the end of the game, the chairpersons are excited.

This is no mere game, though. For the players, typically fishers, it is a window into the future, if fishing practices continue as they do. It's a warning of the lurking dangers of unsustainable practices. It's just one of the pieces of the program employed by RARE Philippines, to ensure that fishing the archipelago remains sustainable.

Modified from materials from the Environmental Defense Fund, the Fish Game is typically played



A Fish Game in progress



Fish landing in Mercedes Town in Bicol
Photo Credit: Jason Houston, RARE

in conjunction with a related game called “Fisher Cards” where participants are asked to identify good and bad fishing/ fisheries management practices. The Fish Game is used by RARE to “help communities think about different fishery management strategies, how effective they are, their challenges etc., and start thinking about what they need to do to improve things,” says Rocky Sanchez

Tirona, vice president, RARE Philippines.

Philippines is one of the world’s largest fishing nations, with 2.3 million tonnes of catch a year, and more than \$3.3 billion in revenue generated. About 85% of the fishers are small-scale fishers who have seen the catch move further away with each passing year.

While the global sustainable seafood market hit \$11.5

billion in retail sales in 2016, markets in Asia are now warming up to the concept. While developing countries produce 80% of the seafood, they only account for 11% of the sustainable seafood market, according to the 2016 report “The SSI Review: Standards and the Blue Economy.”

RARE, known worldwide for their conservation efforts in fields as varied as species protection,



Women at savings club meeting
Photo Credit: Yasmin Arquiza RARE

cotton farming and watershed management, commenced operations in the Philippines in 2010, when it focused on marine habitat protection. However, it soon became apparent that marine habitat was but one node of a complex web of factors that was the fishing ecosystem in the country.

Fish Forever, a partnership between the Environmental Defense Fund, RARE and the Sustainable Fisheries Group was launched in the Philippines in 2014, with the extended brief of tackling overfishing, illegal fishing, dynamiting and habitat destruction and ecosystems through a two-pronged approach.

One, the program works with the local municipal

units to create special fishing zones that are exclusive to local fishers who satisfy stringent requirements and no-take zones, where fish supplies is replenished. Two, they work with the communities, who are incentivized to fish more responsibly through a variety of programs aimed at them.

The impact of the program is slowly becoming apparent. Bindoy is a municipality of about 40,000 people, and it was the location of one of RARE's first projects. Bindoy is also known for Mantalip Reef, and this was what RARE's first project sought to save. The municipality has now seen an increase in available fish. Across the country, for

the period 2015-2017, fish biomass increased in nine out of the 12 latest Fish Forever sites.

"These things do take time, and in a few years, we hope to see a lot of positive impact," says Yasmin Arquiza, senior manager, communications and events, RARE Philippines.

RARE's Fish Forever program works at several levels to ensure that fishing remains sustainable, while fixing the focus on the most important stakeholder: the fisher. RARE has agreements with 38 municipal units where the Fish Forever program is being implemented. While it is a long way to go for all 900 coastal government units to adopt the program,



Fish processing underway
Photo Credit: RARE

changes in national policy seem within reach.

Support from the local administration is encouraging, as RARE strongly believes that change must come from within communities.

Fellows in Government Step Up

RARE's model has the Conservation Fellow as the central changemaker, who works for two years to operationalize the Fish Forever program in their municipalities. While the initial fellows came from civil society and nonprofits, RARE appoints fellows from within the government since 2015.

"This works better in terms of sustainability

of the program," says Arquiza. "There is also some accountability on the government's part."

One fellow, Vincent Dueñas, is a fisheries technician in the Municipal Agriculture Office of Cortes, in Surigao del Sur, a province on the eastern coast of Philippines. He talks about the trouble he had with fishers who used dynamite. He also talks about his journey as a RARE Conservation Fellow, and how participation from the community turned the tide in his favour. Duenas continues to work in the local government, and in fact, Cortes has become of the most successful Fish Forever sites in the Philippines, bagging the

inaugural government award for sustainability, the Malinis at Masaganang Karagatan award.

Community Matters

The community of Cortes, which won the award, did so not only because of its participation in the Fish Forever program but also because it has been proactive in encouraging a community-led solution towards sustainable fishing. The mayor of Cortes, William M. Angos, himself a scuba diver, has long championed the cause of restoration of marine habitats.

That the involvement of the communities is essential is driven home time and again across all RARE sites. RARE's



The range of processed fish from Fishers and Changemakers, Inc.

“When they (the fishers) saw the final products, they forgot about the money but valued the sense of pride and dignity gained from producing the high-quality product.”

Dhang Tecson

Fishers and Changemakers, Inc.

program works directly with the fishers, who receive exclusive fishing rights in Managed Access Areas in return for adherence to strict regulations, including registration of boats and fishers.

The Conservation Fellows often travel to the villages and work with the community to identify problems, part of which is the Fish Game. They then work out strategies to tackle the identified problems.

One of the campaigns of RARE has been to support the government’s push for fisher registration. “Many of these fishing villages have no access to services. This is likely the first ID card the fishers will have and so that’s exciting for them,” says Arquiza.

This drive, in conjunction with government policies that promote registration have resulted in an increase in fisher registration. For instance, the community of Looc received a prize from the Department of Agriculture—Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources for their good fisher and boat registration. The number of registered fisheries went up by 33% from 1055 registrations in 2016-17.

End-to-End Assistance

What makes RARE’s efforts stand out is the fact that it is fisher-centric. Two of its initiatives—savings clubs and creating market links and value addition to fish—have received great response.

The first was the result of understanding the home economics of fishers, whose economic vulnerability during medical and other crises usually led them to illegal fishing. With the help of savings clubs, they are more financially stable. It also helps get the children involved in the community.

The second, fish processing, is a value

addition that has great potential to transform the fishers’ lives. Armed with knowledge of fish processing and drying techniques and links to fair trade companies that market premium seafood, fishers can eliminate middlemen and create better value for their catch.

One such social enterprise is Fishers and Changemakers, Inc. (FCI), which makes and markets seafood products that are created using sustainable technologies and equitable business practices. Their partnership with RARE is in six municipalities, with a target of about 40 kilos of assorted dried seafood per month.

Dhang Tecson is co-founder and chief marketing “mermaid” of FCI says that their partnership with RARE appeared at the right time, and having them as their technical team made it easier to understand the sustainability part of the equation. It also ensured that the catch followed sustainable practices, and it helped scale up operations, dovetailing RARE’s expansion.

Tecson shares experiences of fishers being changed after their experience with FCI. “When they saw the final products, they forgot about the money but valued the sense of pride and dignity gained from producing the high-quality product,” she says.

Where’s My Mascot?

While the most visible facet of RARE’s work has been the Pride campaign, featuring the (often) dancing local species as a mascot, Arquiza says that is usually one of the last pieces of the puzzle. “They (mascots) serve as a constant visual reminder to the community of what it is they are trying to save,” she says.

People are likely to encounter the mascots in posters and billboards in the municipal building, in the fish market, and during festivals on floats. “The community is proud of their mascots. For many fishers, it’s also a constant reminder of their achievements in protecting their coastal areas,” says Arquiza.

The mascots are indeed one of RARE’s salient features. RARE’s roots lie in the social marketing that helped RARE founder David Hill save the St. Lucia parrot from extinction. Hill’s 1979 campaign rendered the parrot ubiquitous—it was everywhere from billboards to stamps, from souvenirs to newspapers. The penalty for killing the bird was increased, and soon, the



“ The community is proud of their mascots. For many fishers, it’s also a constant reminder of their achievements in protecting their coastal areas.”

Yasmin Arquiza
RARE

community started taking pride in the parrot as one of their own.

RARE’s strategy has always been to work on building solutions with the community and bringing the government in as an essential part of the process, before scaling up.

What’s the Catch?

RARE’s efforts have been largely positive, but not without speed-breakers.

Since the initiative is heavily dependent on the local administration, helmed by an elected official, a change in the mayor sometimes means that the new mayor needs to be convinced of the efficacy and need of the program.

FCI has also hit a

few roadblocks during the projects: consistent supply of fish, logistics and transportation, and expensive FDA norms has pushed the project to a corner. However, the teams are working on the supply issue with a seafood calendar for each town, which can better predict the type and amount of catch that FCI can expect. Other species, such as flying fish, are also to be introduced to the market.

The ideal situation, perhaps is one that Belize, a Central American country, has adopted. Aspects of the Fish Forever program, including managed access and Pride campaigns, have been adopted by the country’s Fisheries Department as a

nationwide policy.

However, Belize’s fishing population of nearly 15,000 fishers is a far cry from Philippines’ 1.4 million small-scale fishers. The signs, however, are positive. The most recent Philippine Development Plan emphasizes sustainable fishing and the amended Fisheries Code has increased penalties for illegal fishing.

“It’s a long-drawn process,” says Arquiza. “We are hoping that peer-to-peer interactions between mayors will help us reach more local government units so that we can build a critical mass of partners and gear up for nationwide adoption.” 