

Keywords:

Payments for ecosystems/environmental services (PES), environmental economics, biodiversity and conservation, natural resource management, fisheries



OVERVIEW

IIED Sustainable Markets Group

Project name:

Economic incentives to conserve hilsa fish in Bangladesh

Project leader:

Essam Yassin Mohammed

Time frame:

March 2013–March 2016

Objective:

To introduce a payment for ecosystem services (PES) mechanism that will encourage fishers to avoid overfishing hilsa and raise awareness that livelihoods are linked to sustainable use of this precious resource.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The hilsa (*Tenualosa ilsha*) fishery is by far the largest single species fishery in Bangladesh, employing 450,000 'professional' fishers full time, as well as 2.5 million part time. While hilsa is the most affordable and preferred fish among poor communities, there are concerns about its sustainability. The government has created five hilsa sanctuaries and compensated affected fisher communities along the Meghna River and Ganges Delta for lost earnings, but the top-down approach has several elements that reduce its effectiveness. This project is introducing innovative ways to tackle overfishing problems and allow threatened fish stocks to recover.

CHANGE IN ACTION

This project has helped generate political will to create sustainable, bottom-up solutions that can both preserve hilsa and enhance livelihoods on a regional level. Researchers from IIED, the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) and Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) conducted a preliminary study of the Government of Bangladesh's Hilsa Fisheries Management Action Plan (HFMAP). The plan, which compensated affected communities during an 11-day ban on fishing hilsa, had been set up with little community input. The researchers showed government how it could improve its

Protecting ecosystems and livelihoods

Bangladesh shifts towards more effective, equitable and sustainable approaches for safeguarding hilsa fishing

Over the past 30 years, the hilsa fishery in Bangladesh has been in decline owing to factors ranging from closed migratory routes, pollution and climate change to indiscriminate harvesting, overfishing and mechanised fishing gear. Once abundant in the country's 100 rivers, hilsa is now primarily available only in the Meghna estuary, the Padma River and some coastal areas. The decline of hilsa, which peaked in 1991–92, has increased its market price, putting it beyond reach for many rural and urban poor people.

In 2003, to help the fishery recover, the Government of Bangladesh implemented the Fisheries Management Action Plan (HFMAP). It created five hilsa sanctuaries, imposing an annual fishing ban that was initially 11 days, covering adult hilsa in major spawning grounds, but now lasts six months and also covers juvenile hilsa throughout the country. To compensate fishers for lost earnings, it provided 187,000 households in 'affected' communities with 30kg of rice each month, as well as support for alternative income-generating activities, including rickshaws, sewing machines, goats and cows, and cash grants to create small businesses. Other measures included an awareness programme to explain the benefits of protecting juvenile hilsa, and monitoring and enforcement actions. The government funded all these activities out of its own budget.

At first glance, the actions seem to have achieved impressive results: between 2001/02 and 2010/11, hilsa catch levels increased from 0.19 to 0.34 metric

tonnes. In March 2012 however, a preliminary study by IIED, Bangladesh University of Agriculture (BUA) and the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) revealed several elements in the government's approach that could reduce its effectiveness. Increased catch levels, for example, may not correlate to a healthier ecosystem. The government programme could not clearly identify the hilsa's reproductive and migration patterns, which are so crucial to successful conservation strategies. Also, all the compensation may not have been reaching its intended target.

Taking a PES approach

IIED and its partners met with public officials in March 2013, praising the government's intentions to protect the fishery and livelihoods. They pointed out, for example, that government compensation to fishers represented a payments for ecosystems (PES) approach – a concept new to the government. With PES, the owners of ecosystems sign contracts with the end users of the service, who compensate them for safeguarding natural resources. The government was pleased that researchers were taking an interest in the country's 'national fish', and was eager to learn more.

Because fishers do not 'own' the rivers, the context for PES-type projects involving the hilsa fishery is more complex. For PES to work, IIED and its partners suggested that the government needed to generate knowledge on a range of areas, including identification of fisher households and

approach, making it more efficient, effective and sustainable. At a workshop organised by the partners, the government sat down as an equal partner with a diverse group of stakeholders. And as a consequence of IIED and its partners establishing trust at an early stage, it was open to modifying policy to increase the social, economic and ecological sustainability of the fishery.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- By acknowledging the government's good intentions and positive results, IIED and its partners established trust, opening the door to constructive suggestions and opportunities for more effective, equitable and sustainable approaches.
- Giving space for stakeholders to share their views built solidarity and partnership, strengthening collaboration. The participation of high-level government officials created buy-in to the process of change, and helped generate and maintain political will.

PARTNERS' VIEW

The project changed the government's perceptions. As a result, it committed to increasing economic incentives to the wider community [increasing the coverage and extending the commitment period], as well as the amount of support to fisher men and women. Lessening the hardship of complying with fishing bans encouraged the fishers to continue their cooperation to protect the hilsa voluntarily.

Abdul Wahab, PhD
Bangladesh Agricultural University

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Photo: Abdul Wahab

Supporting alternative livelihoods: IIED and partners are helping the Bangladesh government to develop an effective, equitable and sustainable compensation scheme.

communities, household socioeconomic characteristics, total population engaged in hilsa fishery, availability of and access to finance, fishing gear type and size, catch by season, fishing grounds and, most importantly, an assessment of the hilsa stock. Such information could provide a baseline to monitor changes in fish levels, as well as to target the poorest of the poor. A policy briefing, funded by DFID and published in May 2012, helped to communicate these suggestions more effectively.

Open to new ideas

In March 2013, the partners organised a multi-stakeholder workshop in Bangladesh to examine the government's existing compensation scheme and explore knowledge gaps. As part of its openness to new ideas, the government sent high level officials to sit down as equals with scientists, civil society leaders, fisher representatives, media and local and international non-governmental organisations. It was ready to hear concerns raised by fishers, as well as recommendations to improve equity and sustainability. While fishers said they benefit from compensation, for example, they also expressed dissatisfaction with government administration, particularly how cash and in-kind support get distributed. They were particularly concerned about nepotism and corruption that favoured some fishers over others. Many fishers depend on local money lenders who charge exorbitant rates: only half of eligible fishers receive government support and there is no assistance to obtain bank credits.

The government was open to a thorough study of how existing cash and in-kind support affected the lives of fishers during the ban. It also responded

favourably to the idea of a registry of eligible households that could help eliminate inequitable treatment. And it expressed compassion for Bangladeshi fishers as their counterparts in India and Myanmar continued to fish hilsa all year round, reaping the benefits of the Bangladeshi fishers' sacrifice while making no sacrifice of their own.

Recognising the current system as unfair to Bangladesh, the government suggested that a tri-country management system should be put in place. Building on these discussions, IIED is organising a regional workshop among the three countries to explore joint management of the hilsa fishery. These talks are expected to explore a trilateral conservation fund supported through an export tax and/or contributions from the private sector to make it sustainable.

The political will generated by this project is expected to carry over into a new project funded by the Darwin Initiative. IIED and partners will help develop an effective, equitable and sustainable PES project that will reduce threats to marine biodiversity and support livelihoods of hilsa fishers in Bangladesh, Myanmar and India.



Knowledge Products

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