

# 'Don't overlook small-scale, community fisheries'

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**KOTA KINABALU:** The formulation of fisheries policies should take into account the small-scale fisheries sector, which could result in win-win solutions for fishermen, conservation efforts and maintaining food stocks.

Lower Kinabatangan Segama Wetlands Programme coordinator Neville Yapp said at present, policy formulation was mainly tailored to large commercial fishing vessels as it is assumed they contributed the most to the industry.

He said Sabah had the largest number of registered fishing vessels in the country.

"However, out of 20,000 vessels, about 70 per cent, or 15,000, are from small-scale fisheries.

"The contributions of small-scale fisheries to Sabah's socio-economic situation is hugely overlooked.

"That is why small-scale fishing communities have no options and admit that they have a devastating impact (on the marine ecosystem).

"But what can they do if there are no safeguards for them?

"For marine conservation to work, communities with genuine ancestral inheritance in fishing grounds should be given more secure tenure, like *tagal* (traditional river rehabilitation system) in the freshwater ecosystem, and we can implement it in coastal areas."

Yapp was speaking at a panel discussion on "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" at the Sabah Shark and Ray Initiative showcase at the Tanjung Aru Marine Ecosystem Centre here yesterday.

The one-hour discussion also involved WWF-Malaysia marine policy manager Shantini Guna Rajan, Marine Research Foundation conservation officer Ho Kooi Chee and Kota Kinabalu Fishing Boat Owners secretary William Chong.

Yapp cited Chile as an example, saying the authorities' recognition of the roles and custodianship of indigenous communities led to the provision of legal tenure and the mandates given to the groups had helped fish stocks recover.

He said with the rapid growth of recreational fishing as alternative livelihoods for fishermen globally, the government should incorporate it as part of the proposed Sabah Fisheries Enactment.

He suggested that the authorities assess the national subsidy programmes for fishermen and look into whether it had effec-

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# 'Fishermen livelihoods, fish stocks affected by unsustainable fishing'

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tively helped them.

"In the last 20 years, recreational activities have grown rapidly, such as in the United States.

"In Sabah, it has presented alternative sources of income to a lot of fishermen covering the entire coastline, estuaries and mangroves.

"The Sabah Agriculture Blueprint talks about Sabah having a Fisheries Enactment, independent from federal regulations.

"That could be an opportunity to incorporate these examples if there is political will to do it."

Yapp, who also represented Land Empowerment Animals People, a non-governmental organisation, said the livelihoods of fishermen and the health of fish stocks were greatly affected by unsustainable fishing.

National fisheries statistics showed that the Fisheries Department reportedly loses RM6 billion annually due to encroachment by foreign fishermen.

"People in Kota Kinabalu used to depend on fish from Mengalum, but when that place became unproductive, they moved to Kota Belud. Then, Kota Belud people went to Kudat and Kudat

people moved to Pitas, where it is less explored.

"It is going in a circle, in search of the next productive area. But area-based management is highly feasible in a marine landscape as fish replenishes fast.

"You don't need large areas to encourage the return of certain species. It can be as small as bodies of water in front of villages or estuaries if there are strategies to enable certain species that are important for local markets to grow."

Shantini said there was a need to look into small-scale fisheries for better management policy.

"Another thing is that with artisanal fishing or small-scale fisheries, they have over the years evolved a stronger capacity for extracting fish. With technology, they have greater horsepower (boat engine) capacity.

"While we have a deeper understanding of commercial or deeper water fish stocks, we don't have enough understanding of the level of stocks and the impact on coastal and small-scale fisheries in Sabah and throughout the country.

"Statistics can show that there is a decline. But what can we do about it? That needs a lot of collaboration." **By Olivia Miwil**



*Traditional coastal fishermen catching fish in front of their houses, off the Mantanani islands in Sabah recently. PIC BY OLIVIA MIWIL*