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DEVELOPMENT OF A TROCHUS SHELL INDUSTRY IN NEW CALEDONIA

Paper presented by New Caledonia

1. General information

Exploitation of trochus fishing resources in New Caledonia sharply speeded up in 1975, because of the slowing down of mining activity around that time. After reaching a record figure of 1900 tonnes in 1978, trochus production steadied at around 1000 tonnes in 1979 and 1980, and dropped to 725 tonnes in 1981, despite a significantly intensified fishing effort during this last year.

This incipient overfishing calls for the application of more restrictive regulations than those which are currently in force and which are merely designed to protect trochus measuring less than 8 cm (base diameter). ORSTOM has recently undertaken a study, partly funded by the Territory of New Caledonia, which should by 1983 provide a base for rational exploitation of trochus stocks.

2. Development of trochus resources

2.1 Origin of project

Not only has the Territory realised the need to tighten up current regulations, it has also been investigating ways of maximizing the returns from this natural resource.

The trochus shell bought from the fishermen, up to a few months ago at a very low price compared with international market prices, is exported in its raw, rough state, without any local processing.

This prompted the Merchant Navy and Maritime Fisheries Department to initiate a local processing programme which should eventually cover the major part of the trochus harvest and reduce the amount of raw shell exported.

2.2 Pilot project

In order to assess, on a full size sample, the problems likely to be encountered in the implementation of such a programme and the interest of local coastal populations in this type of activity, a pilot project was set up at Oundjo, a Melanesian village on the west coast of the New Caledonian mainland.

This project includes:

- training four young fishermen from this village in a button factory established in Vanuatu, for a period of three months, entirely at the Territory's expense.

- setting up at Oundjo four machines to cut the trochus shell into rough button blanks. The cost of these machines will be approximately 2,300,000 CFP francs, of which 50% will be covered by a grant from FADIL (Interior and Islands Development Fund) and 50% will be put up by the sponsors of the project, to whom a soft bank loan is being granted.

The project is to be implemented within a cooperative type structure and will receive support from government departments both for technical problems and for general management and accounting.

Production of button blanks should be ready to start in the final quarter of 1982 and rapidly reach an output of 600,000 shapes per month.

2.3 Prospects

Should this project prove to be economically feasible and the fishermen to be capable of adapting to a mechanised and repetitive activity that is completely different from traditional subsistence agriculture and subsistence fishing, the programme will be developed along two lines:

- establishment of several small button blank production units, close to trochus fishing grounds and managed cooperatively by local fishing communities;

- full processing with production of finished mother-of-pearl buttons.

3. Conclusions

The current strong demand for mother-of-pearl buttons on the world market is a favourable factor for the development of trochus processing activities in countries where this shell is abundant.

The fact that local processing industries will not have to import raw trochus shell and therefore not pay the high transport costs that European or Japanese manufacturers have to bear constitutes a further advantage.

On the other hand, the development of a trochus processing industry requires considerable assistance from the local authorities, both for training of local manufacturers and for provision of funds, since the initial investments necessary are quite high when compared with the income of small local fishermen.
