FISHERIES IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE OF NEW CALEDONIA

Background

The responsibilities transferred from the Territory to the Provinces under the Referendum Act of 9 November 1988 included, in the fisheries sector, management of vessels, stock management, marine training and economic development. In 1990, the Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Service operated with two staff based in Noumea. The Provinces’ wish to develop this sector led to an expansion in staff numbers. Today, there are six staff members, including four field workers, two of whom (one in 1991 and one in 1992) attended the training course for Pacific Islands fisheries officers jointly run by the South Pacific Commission and Nelson Polytechnic.

Geography

The lagoon area of the Northern Province amounts to approximately 15,000 km², comprising a variety of biotopes. The west coast features large mangrove areas and a reef close to the shore, while the east coast is fringed by a lagoon exposed to the tradewinds and bordered by a reef quite distant from the shore.

Fishing activity and constraints

Since little monitoring was carried out before the Provinces were set up, actual fishing activity was not accurately known, especially as some pleasure-boat owners landed as much fish as the professional fishermen and sold their catch on the commercial market.

The beginning of 1992 saw professional fishing licences reintroduced as a compulsory measure; issuance is not yet complete, but so far almost 130 professional fishermen have been registered (as against only 70 in 1990).

The constraints encountered by fishermen are essentially connected with the lack of infrastructure on land: fuel depots, storage facilities, ice, repair shops etc., and a lack of training in the practical aspects of their job. In fact, at the present time, less than 10 per cent of active fishermen can be regarded as fishing commercially; the others fish for subsistence to supplement agriculture.

The various types of fishing activity

The range of fishing methods used is not very wide: crabs and shellfish are gathered on foot at low tide, while trochus and sea cucumbers are collected by divers. Fishing as such consists of handlining at night or net-fishing in the lagoon from 5—6 m long boats. Virtually no fishing takes place outside the lagoon even though there are resources to exploit.

— Crab: about 30 metric tonnes of mud crab are caught annually, representing 80 per cent of the Territory’s output. This activity is carried out on foot, mainly by women, during the six months the season is open.

— Trochus: was originally harvested only for its shell, but trochus flesh is now also finding a market. This is the main activity on the east coast. In 1991, the output of the Northern Province was approximately 100 tonnes or 85 per cent of the Territory’s total production, in decline last year because the trochus exporters stopped buying from June to November.

— Beche-de-mer: harvesting is virtually continued to the Northern Province (almost 1500 metric tonnes in 1991) especially the northern section of that Province. Beche-de-mer is usually dried at the landing site and then sold to three main exporters who ship it to Hong Kong. Many fishermen are asking questions about how this resource should be managed.

— Fish: The main species caught are mullet, emperor, sea bream and groupers. Total catch is over 300 tonnes a year, 85 per cent of which is sold on the Noumea fresh fish market. Most of this catch comes from the north and west coasts.

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Provincial involvement

This sector is under the responsibility of the Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Service. A better understanding of it was gained in 1991 with staff increases. Action is taken on two levels: Province-supported projects are set up and contact is maintained with active fishermen through a follow-up service. The former was the Service’s main activity in 1991 but the latter aspect is now considered the priority area. Sixty or so projects have received Provincial assistance since 1990, ranging from motor boat purchases to fish transport facilities; the Province’s contribution is on average 40 per cent of the capital cost. A Province-wide project was carried out to complement the individual support: this was the boatbuilding and repair yard set up under a State Province development contract at Oundjo on the west coast.

Support to the fishermen of the Northern Province has also taken the form of training in conjunction with the “École des Métiers de la Mer” (Marine Training School) which has organised 12 outboard motor, diesel engine and hull maintenance and repair workshops since July 1991.

In 1992, each professional fisherman was given a logbook providing information on the current regulations, including tide tables and income and expenditure calculators which
should make it possible to monitor activities more easily.

Lastly, at the end of 1991, the Northern Province Fisheries Consultative Committee was set up to improve liaison between the administration and the professionals.

The Service also had an involvement in aquaculture by monitoring the feasibility study and funding proposals for the Gatope shrimp farm (west coast).

Prospects

Resource management: Little research in this sector has been carried out in the Northern Province, but a study on the mud crab is in progress.

ORSTOM has been approached to conduct a lagoon fish stock appraisal which could be funded under the development contracts, with the Fisheries Service collecting the fishermen’s catch statistics. A study on traditional management of fisheries is under way; some kind of control now needs to be exercised over the lagoon.

Development of lagoon fishing: This work began this year. The aim is to improve infrastructure on land, facilities available, fishing gear, fishing techniques and harvest quality as well as restructuring the profession to enhance profitability.

Development of coastal fishing: The purpose here is to introduce some larger vessels (9–12 metres) which could fish outside the lagoon using trolling and deep-bottom methods. This will also require local and export market research to be carried out. The fishermen will need training for this type of activity.

Development of aquaculture: The Northern Province possesses enormous areas with potential for aquaculture. The realisation and the success of the Gatope shrimp farm should lead to other such ventures in years to come and construction of a hatchery in the Northern Province. Oyster farming trials will also be undertaken.

Part of the Belep fishing boats fleet (photo taken during a training course organised by the Marine Training School on outboard motor, diesel engine and hull maintenance)