

BOOK REVIEW

SADOVY, Y.J. and J.MACLEAN, *While Stocks Last – the Live Reef Food Fish Trade*. Manila: Asia Development Bank, 2003

This book is a timely reminder to Asian and Pacific Island Countries of some of the issues of the Live Reef Food Fish (LRFF) trade that has been established in these regions. The harvest of reef food fish for sale as live food fish in the restaurants in Hong Kong and China has been promoted as a lucrative market from the regions with arguably the most extensive coral reefs in the world. The trade however is not totally free of controversies.

The book is collectively written by scientists independently working in different aspects of the trade. The book depicts aspects of the LRFF trade that are commonly ignored. For example, the book shows the extent to which the LRFF trade causes degradation of resources on which the trade depends and how it seems that the trade moves farther and farther from the main centres as the original areas of fishing effort are decimated.

The LRFF threatens both the source of livelihood of coastal villagers and the resilience of reefs. Coastal communities are lured by the higher prices they are offered for their fish and surrender their most valued food species to the markets. This erosion of coastal communities' food resources threatens food security in these areas as people easily give their own food base to an insatiable market.

The LRFF trade is responsible for the removal of key predator species from reefs, which can alter the food web and ultimately the ecosystem in these areas. In addition, the use of destructive fishing methods such as cyanide decimates the reefs and other non-targeted species. This problem compounds the devastating effects of natural phenomena such as El Nino and the increases in water temperatures that cause coral bleaching.

The LRFF trade provides a highly regarded luxury food in Southeast Asia. Retail prices for LRFF range from 5 to 180 US dollar per kilogram, making LRFF species amongst the most valued fish commodities on the market. The total retail value of the trade in Hong Kong in 2002 was 486 million US dollar while it was 810 million for the Asia Pacific region as a whole.

Fishers in the LRFF are paid two to four times the prices they get for the same fishes dead, although this discrepancy is not observed in all areas and depends on individual buyers. However, there is a mark up of 100 – 200 percent on wholesale prices, which reflects rental costs, restaurant reputation and location, and the desirability of the LRFF purchased.

The book covers some of the important aspects of the LRFF trade. The comprehensive introduction systematically explores key aspects of the trade, which then are examined in more detail on a chapter by chapter basis. The main chapters include economic and trade issues, fisheries resources, social issues, management of trade, aquaculture and institutional aspects. The conclusion provides a comprehensive list of unresolved pertinent issues. These include, for example, the observation that the need to restrict the nature and scale of the industry at a sustainable level is not easily achieved due to the restricted capacity in the source countries.

The LRFF trade often is developed alongside subsistence fisheries where the

fishers are eager to engage in income generating activities. This presents difficulties because these communities are often not fully aware of the features of the trade. Monitoring and enforcement of standards and safe practices are difficult given the lack of information and capacity in the areas where the trade is undertaken. The LRFF trade needs to be monitored and managed properly to ensure that the negative impacts are minimised.

Some of the pertinent features of LRFF trade that need to be addressed include:

- Overfishing and the depletion of resources that affect other fisheries;
- Destruction of coral and mortality of non-targeted species;
- Fishing of spawning aggregation that decimates targeted species populations;
- Dependence of aquaculture on the grow-out of wild caught fish;
- Wastage of non targeted species that are food for local communities;
- Social conflict within communities because of the trade;
- Continued trade in the endangered and threatened species.

These issues are particularly pertinent in Small Island Developing States where the trade is introduced as a lucrative economic development alternative. The trade is based on a misconception that wild species are preferred by consumers, who in tests have shown difficulty distinguishing wild from cultured fish (Omnitrak 1997). In addition, the actual quantities of fish caught for the trade are much higher than the 15,000 – 21,000 tonnes recorded. This is due to the huge quantities of these fish that do not reach the market either because of spoilage and the ones that are not accurately recorded due to poor capacity. This feature of the trade is partially responsible for the boom-and-bust feature of the industry.

The book is well researched and provides valuable advice to countries contemplating entry into the LRFF trade. It is also a reminder of the challenges involved to the communities that may see the trade as an alternative economic activity for their people. The book addresses some of the main concerns of stakeholders including the issues of viability, particularly the biological sustainability, the implications for the various groups in the trade and the gaps in data and knowledge.

I recommend this book for resource planners, managers, community leaders and marine studies researchers and students.

Reference

OMNITRAK, *Summary of the Taste Test between the Mariculture and Wild-caught Malabar Grouper*. Honolulu: The Nature Conservancy, 1997.

Joeli Veitayaki
University of the South Pacific