

ANGLING AND ECO-TOURISM SEMINAR
A PERSONAL IMPRESSION

The one-day leave I took to attend the Seminar at the University of Malaya on 31st March 1997 turned out to well-spent. There I met many people whose names I had heard, whose writings I had read and to some of whom I had spoken on the phone. They turned out to be, like most other anglers, very jovial, easy-going, friendly and unpretentious.

The papers presented were well researched or were the product of a wealth of experience. They were interesting and very informative. The discussions were lively, frank, honest and to the point. The atmosphere was most friendly.

I congratulate the organizers for the good work done. The Fisheries Department too should be congratulated. They seemed to take the seminar quite seriously. Quite a number of them, including from the various States turned up and participated. But what I do not understand is that why none of them (at least those I talked to) is an angler. If some of them are, may be we would not have the two-hooks-to-one-line rule or, we might not hear of the proposed one-rod-one-angler rule, which, to me, is like restricting one golfer to one club (I mean the "kayu", not the club house)!

However, I was rather disappointed at the lack of participation by the Tourism people. At one point I wondered whether the participants were wasting their time talking about Eco-Tourism the whole day.

Anyway, the Seminar, no doubt, had fostered a closer relationship between officers of the Fisheries Department and the anglers. For one thing, I think they realized that they were not enemies: they were equally concerned about conservation. They also realized that they could help each other. For example, the officers were talking about lack of information and their difficulty in obtaining it. The anglers said "Tell us what information you want. Tell us who we can contact. We have the information. We will give it to you."

One participant asked a very pertinent question: where do we go from here! In response there was more or less a unanimous view that some kind of body, call it a "task force", "committee" whatever (after all, "What is in a name?") should be formed to sit down and do the follow-up actions. I sincerely hope that such a body will be set up soon.

On the follow-up actions, I think we should have our list of priorities right. Of the many points raised and discussed some need more urgent attention than others, some can be done more easily than others. I would list the priorities as follows:

First, enforcement I think I can safely say that it was unanimously agreed that there was insufficient enforcement of whatever law we now have. In riverine waters there seems to be almost no enforcement at all. One participant, an angler from Pahang, was close to tears when he narrated what he saw

happening in the upper rivers of Pahang. Others, also anglers, were obviously angry, disappointed and sad about what they saw happening in Taman Negara. And they were not the only ones. Enforcement in maritime and estuarine waters is slightly better. But it is still very inadequate. Go out to sea on Saturday afternoons or on public holidays, especially the Hari Raya Holidays, if you want to see the most blatant encroachments by trawlers.

There are no two ways about it. There must be more officers, more and faster boats to patrol the sea, the rivers and the waters. There must also be officers trained to prosecute the offenders in court, not just to write compound notices.

Anglers can be enlisted to be the “detectives” on the ground (more correctly, at sea and rivers) to report of the commission of offences. I am sure they are ever ready do it. But there must be officers to receive the reports and response must be fast.

However, in enforcing the law, our law being what it is now (see “Angling and the Law”) we must have our priorities too. We should concentrate on activities which cause most damage to fish and fish habitat, for example, indiscriminate trawling and the use of explosives at sea and the use of explosives, poison and nets in rivers and lakes. Never mind the anglers who use more than two hooks. They don’t do much harm, if at all.

Of course, other departments, like the Forestry Department, Local Governments, DOE and others must also step up their enforcement. The biggest polluters are under their jurisdiction.

Secondly, we should look at our law. In this too we should have our priorities. Anglers will go fishing. You cannot stop them. Most of them have no choice but to hire boats, usually fishing boats. It is better to legalize the hiring of boats to take anglers to go fishing. Besides helping the anglers to hire boats legally, the anglers will also be helping the fishermen to subsidize their meager incomes. As I said at the Seminar, when there is not much fish to catch, fishermen should catch anglers, instead. Anglers, unlike fish, are a sure catch and they have more purchasing power too.

Besides, with licensing of boats to take anglers to fish, conditions can be imposed about safety requirements. Control is also easier.

Next, the follow-up actions provided by the existing laws, should be done. One example is the provision for Gazette Notifications to be made regarding closed area, closed season and limitation as to size.

States which have not adopted the Fisheries Act 1985 regarding riverine fishing should be impressed to adopt it. States which have not made Riverine Fishing Rules should be impressed to make them. Never mind that the present Rules have some weaknesses. There are also many useful provisions. A clear example is the prohibition of the use of explosives, poison and electrical

appliances to catch fish and the creation of criminal offences connected therewith.

Then we should sit down and seriously consider a review of the present law and rules. In this respect, riverine fishing requires greater attention as it is in this area that the rules, depending in which State you are, are either non-existent or unsatisfactory and many species are fast disappearing or, at least, becoming more and more scarce. A model Rules should be produced and be adopted by all States. With good advice from the officers and a bit of political will from the politicians it can be done quite easily and fast.

In the meantime I urge anglers to exercise self-discipline by being selective in their catch, by practicing catch and release of the rare species, by not destroying fish habitat, by not polluting or littering the waters, in short by showing good examples. It is hoped that the public, especially the loggers, factory owners, developers, contractors, pig farmers and others, will play their part too to keep our waters clear and our fish alive. Given a bit of time, it is hoped that there will be more fish again. Then, may be, we can talk about sport fishing and eco-tourism again.

I hope I am not dreaming!

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31 December 1997 (Given date)