

ONE EARTH

# Bringing back the Terubok

A riverine folk take stock while the shad gets a fighting chance for survival, S.L. Wong finds

It tastes like nothing else – “*lain dari yang lain*” – as Sarawakian fisherman Solhi Solhee puts it. Such is the Terubok (*Tenualosa toli*), a delicacy whose meat and eggs are in such high demand that the fish has been pushed to extinction’s doorstep. In Southeast Asia, this tropical riverine shad is found in only two estuaries, both of which are in Sarawak, and spawning in fact, occurs in only one of these – Batang Lassa, where Solhi comes from.

Solhi and his fellow fishermen have been watching dwindling catches eat away at their livelihoods. These are local fisherfolk who have known no other way of eking out a living for generations. Then came along a strategic project that held hopes of ensuring that the Terubok fish and its fishing would be sustainable, while addressing income generation concerns at the same time.

The two-year project, Community Participation in the Sustainable Management and Fishing of Terubok in Daro, Sarawak (<http://www.sdi.com.my/terubok>) was implemented by non-government organisation Sarawak Development Institute (SDI), with a RM164,000 grant from the United Nations Development Programme – Global Environment Facility (UNDP-GEF) Small Grants Programme.

The Small Grants Programme aims to promote sustainable livelihoods among local communities by simultaneously addressing their socio-economic and environment benefits via projects implemented by non-government and/or community-based organisations.

## CLOSED SEASONS

Using the Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) approach facilitated by SDI, 132 villagers from the area, identified their resources, threats, livelihoods and future prospects. They decided unanimously that it was necessary to boost Terubok stocks by having closed fishing seasons during the spawning periods and introducing sustainable fishery management strategies such as licensing to restrict the number of fishermen and fishing boats. The assessments and solutions they came up with will feed into a long term Terubok management and conservation plan by the Department of Agriculture.

To address the resulting loss of income due to these measures, a core group of 20 led by Solhi also identified and piloted an alternative income generation solution.

## Taking Turns

The T. toli has an interesting survival mechanism: both males and females can spawn. However, conditions have to be just right. Males spawn in their first year. They do this in the middle reaches of large, turbid estuaries with low salinity. After spawning, they swim to the lower reaches and middle salinity coastal waters and change into females. In the next season, it is these females’ turn to spawn, and they return to the same spawning grounds to do so. After this, the fish come to the end of their two year-plus lifespan. What’s more, with the sex change comes a name change: males are known locally as Empirit and females, Terubok. It is the egg-laden spawning fish that are the target of fishermen and consumers.

- Source: Proceedings of the International Terubok Conference Sarawak, Malaysia, SDI (November 2001)



What used to be two disused ponds in the village have been rehabilitated and used for a prawn pond aquaculture project. “We are all hopeful that this will work as an alternative means to make a living,” said Solhi, adding that the rest of the villagers had bought into these initiatives and were keeping a keen eye on their outcomes.

A UNDP-IMPLEMENTED PROJECT



UNDP/PIX BY MARTIN ABRAHAM

ABOVE: A local fisherman catching Terubok; BELOW: Prawn culture makes up for loss of income during the closed season

Therefore, SDI approached the Sarawak state government to provide appropriate policy backing for Terubok conservation.

Thanks to the strong support of the Chief Minister, the Deputy Chief Minister and the State Secretary, an ordinance on Inland Fisheries was passed in May last year (2003). One of the objectives of the ordinance is to protect and conserve fishery sanctuaries in their natural habitats.

## ASIAN CAVIAR

SDI has since then also initiated a number of dialogues on Terubok conservation, sustainable use and management with other villages in the area. To further strengthen the sustainable management of fishery resources, the public now needs to be roped in, including traders of the Terubok fish and its eggs. In particular, there is a need to reduce and eliminate the demand among rural and urban folk for the eggs, a delicacy sometimes known as “Asian caviar”.

It is only by raising awareness of the drastic decline of Terubok and promoting the need for the conservation and sustainable fishing at all levels, can the riches afforded by this delicate and unique fish continue to be enjoyed by present and future generations.

## Terubok talk

- 1 In 2000, Sarawakian fishermen spent about five hours on average on a fishing trip. How many Terubok were they catching per trip?
- 2 What is the survival rate of Terubok hatchlings?
- 3 The Terubok now costs RM25 a kg. How much did it cost five years ago?
- 4 Most salted Terubok consumed in Malaysia is an imported marine species. Where do they come from?
- 5 Terubok used to be found in the Straits of Malacca. What caused its extinction?



- Source: Proceedings of the International Terubok Conference Sarawak, Malaysia, SDI (November 2001)

- ANSWERS:
1. Two or less
  2. One or two out of 500,000
  3. RM8 a kg
  4. Bangladesh and India
  5. Siltation of estuaries due to tin mining

## People’s Participation

Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) is a development planning tool using various methodologies to understand a specific situation. The knowledge of the community involved is taken as the starting point and visiting planners or project developers learn from the community. The goal is to identify concrete actions based on a shared understanding of the situation. The notion of people’s participation is widely recognised as a basic operational principle of development programmes and projects. People’s participation can ensure sustainability, raise effectiveness and help build local capacities. For a UNDP Civil Society Division guide to people’s participation in development, log on to <http://www.undp.org/csopp/CSO/NewFiles/docemppeople.html>.

- Sources: UNDP, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

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