



**The 2nd Meeting of the Project Steering Committee for
the SEAFDEC/UNEP/GEF Project on Establishment and Operation of a Regional System of
Fisheries *Refugia* in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand**
5th – 6th November 2019
Pullman Hotels and Resorts, MIRI, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

**PROJECT CONCEPT
(FOR REVIEW)**

Improving Healthy Ocean Ecosystems through Best Practices in Trawl Fisheries

I. INTRODUCTION

Bottom trawl remains one of the major fishing gears in Southeast Asia that contributes to high fisheries production making many countries in the region among the top ten highest producers of fish in the world. However, the perceived lack of selectivity of the trawl net and the resultant capture of huge quantities and diversity of non-target species, including endangered species, coupled with its significant effect on the environment as overfishing threatens fish stocks globally, reduces biodiversity, alters the ecosystem functioning, and jeopardizes the food security and livelihoods of people.

Although, modern gear, materials, practices, and management of bottom trawling have gone a long way in reducing the catch of unwanted species and the environmental damage caused by trawl fishing, their impacts on the marine environment that include degradation of the bottom/seabed habitats, spread of marine plastic debris, and occurrence of microplastics from lost or abandoned trawl nets, have not undergone changes until the present. In addition, the existing large numbers of traditional trawlers in Southeast Asia, about 40,000 are still active, add to the increased emission of CO₂ into the air. These negative trends will intensify through time if major measures are not taken to address those mentioned impacts.

To solve these problems, the project considers four main actions that are urgently needed: the promotion of effective trawl fisheries management policies, development of innovative trawl technology, reduction of carbon footprint in fisheries, and creation of the artificial habitats to protect demersal fish stocks in the affected offshore areas. Given that, the enormous impacts of bottom trawl fishing on the health of the oceans should be impeded, particularly the alterations caused on the seabed habitats and in marine biodiversity on the continental shelf of Southeast Asia (Sunda Shelf). Such evidence is also necessary to effectively assess and manage the environmental impacts of fishing methods and to address tradeoffs given that bottom trawl fishing makes a substantial contribution to human food supply in the world market.

II. REVIEWS

The South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand are geographically located on the important Sunda Shelf as a southeast extension of the continental shelf of Southeast Asia that includes the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo, Java, Madura, Bali, and their surrounding smaller islands (Ben-Avraham 1973). It covers an area of approximately 1.85 million km² (Van Bemmelen 1949) and comprises large fishing areas suitable for bottom trawl fishing since the past.

Bottom trawl fishing in Southeast Asia has emerged since early 1970s, as a major industrialized fishing method, and became a dominant fishing method in offshore and coastal areas. Rapid expansion of trawl

fishing effort, conversion of vessels, expansion of the geographical range of fishing, and retention of most animals caught have resulted in rapid depletion of stocks and changes to stock composition, destroying critical habitats, causing high impacts on benthic communities, catching of bycatch species, threatening and endangering major aquatic species, and even altering the associated ecological communities (Kongprom *et.al.* 2003; Nurhakim 2003; Campos 2003). This declining trend is compatible however with the fishing 'down marine food web', reported from well-studied parts of the South China Sea, notably the Gulf of Thailand (Christensen *et.al.* 2003).

In terms of socioeconomic impacts, more valuable fish caught by bottom trawl fisheries has decreased sharply and that there has been proportionate increase in smaller, less valuable species. These results provide a clear picture of the extent of stock rehabilitation and management efforts that are required to restore the maximum economic value to the fisheries of the region (Silvestre *et.al.* 2003).

On carbon footprint in fisheries, global fisheries burned almost 200 billion liters of fuel in 2016 compared to 47 billion liters in 1950 (Greet *et.al.* 2019). The most fuel-intensive fishing practices not only contribute most to the damaged seabed habitats and reef formations but also worsen the impacts of climate change. Bottom trawling techniques are the most fuel intensive fishing techniques. Additionally, the intensity of fuel consumption by fisheries in the Southeast Asia is high about 500-2000 liters km⁻² (EC 2007) compared to the other regions in the world. Reducing the carbon footprint of fisheries, particularly in bottom trawling with less fuel consumption and causing less impact from trawling is therefore needed.

Achieving effective fisheries management for bottom trawling is therefore increasingly important as overfishing threatens fish stocks globally, reduces biodiversity, alters ecosystem functioning, and jeopardizes the food security and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people worldwide (Golden *et al.* 2016; Jackson *et al.* 2001; Pauly *et al.* 2005; Szuwalski *et al.* 2017; World Bank 2009). As such, the Project intends to come up with effective fisheries management policies, innovative technology for best practices, reduction of carbon footprint, and stock rehabilitation programs.

III. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project concept note entitled "**Improving Healthy Ocean Ecosystems through Best Practices in Trawl Fisheries in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand**" (FishTrawl) is being developed to meet the need for Strategic Action Program for the South China Sea. The FishTrawl Project would be executed regionally by the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) in partnership with the government agencies responsible for fisheries in the 6 participating countries: namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

The FishTrawl Project integrates the ecosystem-based fisheries management approach through the development of effective national/regional fishery policies on sustainable fisheries and innovative technology for bottom trawl gears and methods including reduction of green-house gas emission from fishing activities. Additionally, building partnerships between multiple public and private sectors, *e.g.* local government/communities, research institutions, net makers, fisheries associations, fish meal industry, fish processors, etc. would be among the approaches to improve and change this production practice into more environmentally positive. The Project includes resources enhancement activities that aim to create offshore artificial habitats or artificial reefs to protect some demersal fish stocks due to loss of seabed habitats affected by the bottom trawl net. Cooperation among country partners and concerned inter-agencies that have the existing programs to deploy artificial reefs along the coastal areas for small scale fisheries is also needed taking into account the offshore demersal fish stocks that have already been depleted. The Project shall comprise the following 4 project components:

Component 1 will consider the results of the impact assessment and management of bottom trawl fisheries through enhanced social dimensions and developed effective fisheries management policies. The outcome of this component is improved baseline data collection and effective fisheries management policies through enhancement of Data Management System. Taking into account the social dimensions concerns, the economic value of fishes and economic efficiency in the industries as well as data collection and management are improved for long term achievements of the Project. Supporting activities are:

- 1.1. Closing the knowledge gap on the ecosystem/environmental impacts of bottom trawling via baseline data collection and evaluation, and establishment of the data management system
- 1.2. Reduction of the pressures of bottom trawling on marine ecosystem and environment via adoption of effective fisheries management policies at national and regional levels
- 1.3. Catalyzing the public-private sectors on the actions via the ecosystem-based fisheries management to build resilient fishery resources and reduce the impacts of bottom trawling via enhanced stakeholder engagement taking into account gender mainstreaming in fisheries management
- 1.4. Establishment of cross-sectorial agreement on national guidelines for effective management of bottom trawl fishing
- 1.5. Endorsement of policy, legal, and planning frameworks, both at national and regional levels, for improving the ecosystem health through best practices in trawl fisheries
- 1.6. Improvement of economic efficiency in the industry and the individual fishers via enhanced traceability system along the value chain of fish and fishery products from bottom trawling
- 1.7. Increasing the economic value of fishes from medium scale bottom trawlers via promotion of marketing and branding as well as marine tourism at local communities;
- 1.8. Sharing of the knowledge and lessons learned to serve as useful platforms for data and information management for utilization by various stakeholders, the wider public and practitioners

Component 2 focuses on improving the bottom trawl fishing gears and methods to be more eco-friendly and fuel-efficient gears through the development of innovative technology and best practices. The outcome of this component is reduced effects of bottom trawling on seafloor/benthic habitats and on the air quality through enhanced innovative technology and best practices in trawl fisheries. Supporting activities are:

- 2.1. Mitigation of the impacts of bottom trawling on marine ecosystem including the seabed habitats, fish stocks, by-catch, ghost fishing, etc. via enhanced ecosystem-friendly fishing gears and methods, bottom trawl innovations, and use of alternative fishing gears;
- 2.2. Enhancement of energy saving trawling including the low impact and fuel efficient fishing through innovative technology for increased fuel-efficient gear and reduced energy consumption or carbon footprint;
- 2.3. Reduction of post-harvest losses from bottom trawlers through improved preservation technology and increased quality of catches;
- 2.4. Enhancement of public-private partnership on innovative and eco-friendly technology through creation of business opportunities and economic considerations;
- 2.5. Building the capacity and knowledge specifically in the field by collaborating with stakeholders for exchanging of the best practices;

Component 3 focuses on rehabilitation of the seabed habitats and fisheries resources enhancement in the offshore areas via installation of artificial reefs. The outcome of this component is increased fisheries production through fisheries enhancement and rehabilitation of seabed habitats programs particularly in the offshore-deep areas where no MPAs have been established and no fish shelters have existed. Using the data management system especially spatial data on fishing effort, the project will monitor the pressures of bottom trawling on seabed, and identify the seabed/grounds for installing the artificial fish habitats to increase fish production in the offshore areas. Supporting activities are:

- 3.1. Investigation of the suitable grounds for deployment of the artificial reefs through the assessment of critical seabed habitats using high-resolution spatial data on fishing effort
- 3.2. Provision of platform for knowledge sharing and exchange of the best practices in installing artificial reefs
- 3.3. Increasing the shelters of fishes in the offshore areas via the deployment of artificial reefs based on scientific data, establishment of trawl ban areas, marine protected areas, etc.
- 3.4. Catalyzing the inter-agencies cooperation for the rehabilitation of offshore seabed habitats

Component 4 will foster the national and regional cooperation and coordination in enhancing the healthy ecosystems through the establishment of data management system, development of the bottom

trawl best practices and alternative gears as well as creation of the offshore artificial fish habitats where there are no MPAs or shelters for fish to hide. At national level, the project will strengthen cross-sectoral coordination and will harness the national scientific and technical expertise and knowledge necessary to promote the policy, legal and institutional reforms for fisheries refugia management in the participating countries. Regionally, Component 4 will foster regional cooperation in: the integration of scientific knowledge and research outputs with effective fisheries management policies; and in enhancing the healthy ocean through the Best Practices in Trawl Fisheries. This component also includes project coordination and management activities aimed at: ensuring the timely and cost-effective implementation of the regional and national-level activities; and satisfying the reporting requirements of UNEP and the GEF. Supporting activities are:

- 4.1. Strengthening of the cross-sectoral coordination in improving the ecosystem health
- 4.2. Harnessing of the national scientific and technical expertise and knowledge in promoting policy, legal and institutional reforms for enhancing the healthy oceans and implementing the best practices in trawl fisheries
- 4.3. Regional cooperation in the integration of scientific knowledge and research outputs with effective fisheries management policies
- 4.4. Regional cooperation in enhancing the healthy ocean ecosystems through the Best Practices in Trawl Fisheries
- 4.5. Effective coordination of regional and national-level activities and satisfying the reporting requirements of UNEP and GEF

The longer-term goals of this Project are to contribute to: improved seabed ecosystems and protected areas in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand; improved national fisheries management policies of the bottom trawling that threatens the demersal fish stocks and critical seabed habitat linkages; and enhanced uptake of best practices in bottom trawl fisheries management and biodiversity conservation in the design and implementation of regional and national fisheries management systems. The medium-term objectives are to: build the resilience of Southeast Asian bottom trawl fisheries to the effects of high and increasing levels of fishing effort on seabed habitats; improve the understanding among stakeholders, including fisherfolk, scientists, policy-makers, and fisheries managers, of the seabed ecosystem and fishery linkages as basis for integrated fisheries and ecosystem/habitat management; and build the capacity of fisheries departments/ministries and all relevant private partnerships to engage in meaningful activities regarding the improvement of fisheries and management of interactions between fisheries and critical seabed habitats. The related end-of-project targets are:

- by 2024, regional data management systems are established for effective fishing management and monitoring of the effects of bottom trawling on seabed habitats
- by 2024, six effective artificial reefs or protected areas or trawl bans are established in the offshore areas of the SCS and Gulf of Thailand
- by 2025, fisheries management policies on the best practices in bottom trawl are developed and implemented
- by 2025, about 20% improved bottom trawlers are adopting the best practices in bottom trawl and reducing their effects on the sea-bed habitats

by 2025, about 25% reduction of carbon footprint from bottom trawling in Southeast Asia is achieved

IV. CONSIDERATION AND ACTION BY THE PSC

- The Committee is requested to take note and consideration the proposed concept note on the “Improving Healthy Ocean Ecosystems through Best Practices in Trawl Fisheries”;
- The committee is welcomed to comment on the paper, and provide direction to the PCU for further action.