

## **THE TERMINATION OF PRAWN TRAWLING IN CHILAW AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR FISHERIES MANAGEMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As the market for prawns increased during the 1960s local, traditional prawn fishing could not meet the demand. Prices rose and businessmen invested in 3.5 t mechanised prawn trawlers. In the Chilaw area the advent of these boats was greatly resented by the local, small-scale fishermen because they disturbed the fishing grounds, damaged fishing gear and were largely owned and manned by people from outside the district. The complaints were met in 1976, and several years thereafter, by sets of regulations which restricted the days on which prawns could be harvested by various methods, in different areas of the fishing grounds. However, these regulations were disobeyed and the Ministry of Fisheries lacked the resources to enforce them. The 3.5 t boat owners formed an association to regulate their own activities but prices continued to rise and by 1980 the incentives for a free for all were overwhelming and the system broke down. Disputes between trawlers and beach seine and other small-scale fishermen increased throughout the 1980s and came to a head in February 1992 with a major conflict which resulted in over a million Rupees worth of damage to property and a police curfew.

Discussions between the Ministry of Fisheries and both parties were underway but were pre-empted by a strong government politician who, seeking votes among the more numerous small-scale fishermen and their supporters, went directly to the Prime Minister who immediately ordered the termination of prawn trawling by police order as a breach of law and order. The Ministry of Fisheries was left with the bill for compensating the owners of the 3.5 t trawlers (which were destroyed) and for providing subsistence allowances to the owners, their crews and their families. This compensation programme still continues.

The implications of this quite arbitrary form of fisheries management, which did at least completely end the long running dispute, are discussed.

### **1. ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE PRAWN TRAWLING INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA**

Until about the latter part of the 1960s, fish and prawns had only a local market in the Island except for the traditional exportable fishery products of Sri Lanka such as c.hanks and pearls. In the local fish market, prawns were in relatively low demand compared to other varieties of fish and accordingly the local prawn market was very small and prawns fetched a lower price than fish. Prawns were a substitute for fish for those who had insufficient money to buy fish at a higher price. It was often seen that low income group consumers bought prawns for their meals.

However, during the period from the latter part of the 1960s to the early part of the 1970s this situation showed a gradual change and at this stage the Asian Prawns Export Market was born. The populations of Singapore, Hongkong and Taiwan, most of whom were of Chinese origin, were economically strong at this period and as a result they had tended to consume rich meals with prawns which they most preferred. Thus the demand for prawns rose due to enhanced sales of this traditional product. This resulted in the creation of a new prawn export market in Asia. The number of prawn exporting businessmen in the Island increased more than ever in the past.

Because prawn production could not meet the demand the price of prawns escalated rapidly. Since then the necessity to increase prawn production in Sri Lanka has been the concern of all those who are engaged in the trade. It was realised that the age old prawn fishing methods could not cope with the anticipated production requirements and it was necessary to introduce more efficient and modern gear. With this economic background the prawn trawling industry, using 3.5 ton mechanised boats, began.

## **2. THE HISTORY OF THE PRAWN TRAWLING FISHERY AND ITS EXPANSION**

It is said that prawn trawling by the traditional canoes from Negombo, which continues to the present day, originated some 100 years ago. It is also known that the prawn trawling gear used with two Catamaran crafts has been in operation on the southwestern coast of the Island from the 1920s. Prawn trawling by 3.5 t (28 feet) mechanised fishing crafts started in the 1950s on an experimental basis and these fishing boats commenced production on a commercial basis in the 1960s. This method then extended into areas such as Mannar, Negombo, Chilaw, Nutwal and Hendala (Fernando and Shantha, 1994).

By the latter part of the 1960s, the prawn trawling by 3.5 t mechanised fishing craft had started in the Chilaw area and by the time this method was abandoned in 1992, there were 137 boats of this type in operation.

## **3. PROTESTS IN REGARD TO PRAWN TRAWLING AND MANAGEMENT STEPS TAKEN IN THIS CONTEXT**

The Chilaw 3.5 t mechanised prawn trawling vessels were not only operating in those areas but these boats were in operating in areas such as Mampuri to the north, and Hendala on the south, of Chilaw. In the early part of the 1970s many protests were pouring in from beach seine fishermen as well as other small scale fishermen in Chilaw and several places to the north and south of Chilaw. Their grievance was that these 3.5 t trawling boats were causing damage to their fishing gear and they had come into the Chilaw area from a long way away, as well as from close to the coastal areas near their villages, and were exploiting their fish and prawn population. Moreover, the fish were frightened by the trawling gear and large boats as a result of which the fish and prawns migrated towards the deep sea area leaving the coastal belt, thus causing loss to the fish resources of the area as well as reducing the catches of the small scale fishermen. These protests later developed into severe conflicts at provincial level which finally became fishing disputes between the parties concerned.

The Department of Fisheries intervened in this dispute and was compelled to set up Commissioner level investigations and finally frame some regulations to control them. The first was the "Chilaw Fisheries Regulations" gazetted on 21/10/1976 (Ariyadasa, 1994). Mechanised prawn trawling was prohibited up to one mile from the coastal belt in areas of the southern bank of Deduruoya and Ambakandawila cemetery grounds, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Prawn catching by other craft was prohibited in these areas on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Prawn catching by any other types of boat on Sundays was prohibited. It is stated in the regulations, that prawn trawling should not cause any obstruction to beach seine fishery activities.

Thereafter, the Iranawila Fishing Regulations were published on 25/09/1978 by the Ministry of Fisheries (Ariyadasa, 1994). This regulation covered the sea areas from north of Iranawila Village limits to the southern limits of Lansigama and prawn trawling by mechanised boats, using of drag nets, was prohibited on days other than Fridays and Saturdays. Finally, the Ministry of Fisheries gazetted the Udappuwa Fisheries Regulations on 01/10/1979 (Ariyadasa, 1994). By this regulation an exclusive beach seine fishing area was allocated covering a 2.5 mile wide stretch of sea adjacent to the coast from Sinnekarakkupota to Udappuwa and no other fishing method or craft is allowed to fish in this area. Another area has been allocated for Theppam fishing only and any other forms of fishing craft are not permitted here.

Through these fishing regulations and by exclusively allocating separate fishing areas for various types of fishing method, especially limiting the days in the week for trawl fishing and Theppam fishing, an attempt has been made to establish a fishing industry management system in this area, at the same time minimising any damage caused to the beach seine fishery and the small scale fishery in Chilaw and adjoining areas to the north and south. However, these regulations could not be implemented. The 3.5 t prawn trawlers continued to operate on days and in areas which were prohibited by these regulations. The Ministry of Fisheries was able to do some inspection work in the sea area only when it had the opportunity to have its own craft or to obtain a boat from the Navy to arrest anyone fishing unlawfully in the prohibited areas or to chase them off. The Ministry was at a disadvantage mainly because it did not have the required resources such as patrol boats and lacked skilled personnel with legal training.

#### **4. BACKGROUND TO THE TERMINATION OF THE PRAWN TRAWLING IN CHILAW**

For about two and a half decades, there was no management system in relation to the Chilaw 3.5 t prawn trawling fishery. In the 1970s there was a community-based fisheries management system operated by a society comprising the 3.5 t boat owners, the basic objective of which was the continue operations with the existing number of boats and to operate that number of boats for a limited number of days in the week. Under this management system, each family who owned boats undertook not to allow any increase in the fleet in the Chilaw area. However, this management system failed in the 1980s because the export demand for prawns went up and the price of prawns in the local market increased correspondingly.

To meet this situation each fishing family in Chilaw who owned boats increased their fishing fleet. In addition to this, fishermen who did not engage in this type of fishing earlier also used their boats for this purpose. As the number of fishing craft engaged in this type of fishing in the Chilaw area increased, an acute competition between these boats owners was created and for this reason they started operating the boats even on days that were prohibited for fishing under the management system in question. Fishing was even carried out in the areas prohibited North and south of Chilaw. This situation resulted in major conflicts and an atmosphere of dispute between the parties in Chilaw in the 1980s. During this period, the prawn trawling boatmen frequently had rows with the beach seine and small scale fishing operators in Chilaw and adjoining areas and even in places further afield. The 3.5 t trawler owners won the battles on most occasions because

they had the backing of a politician of the State in Chilaw area and also because they were economically strong.

The beach seine and small scale fishermen in Chilaw and adjoining areas did not give up the fight and went on fighting for their rights often complaining to the political authorities in the area and the State departments regarding their opponents behaviour, but failed because they were weak and did not have political help. However, at the final stage, the small scale fishermen who were in the majority, were fortunate enough to receive some response from a sponsor. He is a person from outside Chilaw but a politician of the governing party who was canvassing hard to obtain a large preferential vote in the Puttalam District which was considered essential. The common cause of both parties came together beautifully at the same time. A strong patron who was essential to the small scale fishermen in Chilaw and a large group of clients with the asset of a large number of preferential votes needed by the so called patron, met each other for a common goal.

##### **5. TERMINATION OF THE PRAWN TRAWLING BY 3.5 T BOATS IN CHILAW**

A grand opportunity to terminate this fishery arose at dawn on the 4th of February, 1992. On this day there occurred a gigantic dispute between the small scale fishermen and the 3.5 t trawler operators. During this dispute, in addition to the physical injuries caused to the people, over one million Rupees worth of property was lost by destruction and fire. The dispute led to a situation where a provincial police curfew had to be declared in Chilaw beach area. At this stage the Ministry of Fisheries, was having discussions with both the parties searching for an amicable settlement.

However, the strong politician of the government party representing Puttalam District, who sided with the small scale fishermen, showed greater efficiency and was faster than the Minister in charge of Fisheries. He met the Prime Minister immediately and made arrangements for total termination of the operation of the 3.5 t prawn trawling fishery with effect from 10th March 1992, by Police order under conditions of breach of law and order in the area. The Minister of Fisheries and his officials were not aware of this arrangement until the decision came into effect.

The Minister of Fisheries and his officials were left only with paying compensation to the boat owners who had lost employment in the fishery and to implementing the scheme to give them relief. Hence, the 137 prawn trawling vessels ceased their fishing activities and there were 132 owners of these boats. The Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources destroyed the boats, and paid compensation to their owners and to the 663 crew members. In place of their destroyed boats, the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources provided them with 25% subsidy against the cost of purchasing alternative boats of 34, 32 and 17.5 foot plus marine engines and fishing gear. The balance of 75% was arranged with loans from the Peoples Bank, the Bank of Ceylon, the Hatton National Bank and the Provincial Rural Development Bank on submission of applications for same. Until such time as the alternative boats are supplied, the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources pay subsistence allowances of Rs. 150/- per day per affected family unit amounting to Rs. 4500/- per month. Total provision for this payment was released from the Treasury to the Department of Fisheries and the Banks.

This compensation payment programme was introduced as the "Chilaw Fisheries

Rehabilitation Project” and was implemented by the Fisheries Industry unit of the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources.

Following are the details of expenditure incurred by this project;

i.	25% subsidy for fishing boats etc. from the Department	Rs. 37,062,200
ii.	75% Bank Loan component	Rs. 111,186,600
iii.	Compensation for the destroyed boats	Rs. 8,23 1,500
iv.	Monthly subsistence allowance to the Trawler owners and the Boat crew families	Rs. 62,258,882
	Total	Rs. 218,739,182

## 6. ASSESSING THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Firstly, it would be useful to assess the method used to terminate this trawl fishing for prawns. The proper way to act in this type of dispute is to appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the dispute in terms of the Fisheries Ordinance and to frame regulations on its recommendations for implementation. Instead, what happened here was that the prawn trawling was stopped by Police order. Further, there was no inquiry made to investigate the charges made by the small scale fishermen against the prawn trawlers. No opportunity was given to the 3.5 t trawler fishermen to represent any of their case in regard to the charges made against them.

The charges were totally accepted, arbitrarily without any inquiry. Further, no attention was paid to all the types of fishing industry in the Chilaw area. There was only concern over the small scale fishing industry in the area. No one had the least care for the previous management system which prevailed in Chilaw. In other words, they did not consider the community-based management system of the trawler owners or the provisions of the Fisheries Regulations for dealing with the dispute. Also, before termination of the prawn trawling fishery, no attempt was made to investigate whether the prawn resources could be exploited to the maximum level by the gill nets of the small scale operators in the Chilaw region without damaging the prawn population. All these management deficiencies are seen in the programme adopted for terminating the 3.5 t prawn trawl fishery in Chilaw.

It would also be useful to assess the scheme to pay compensation and subsidy to those who suffered losses i.e. the boat owners and the crew. It has to be stated that this programme was a very expensive, long-lasting and highly complicated issue. The programme started at the end of March 1992 and after two and a half years has not finished yet. What has really taken place is that the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources has been brought into close combat with the trawler owners and the crew who have, from time to time, been submitting various proposals to the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. This situation has led this project to drag on to the present day adding more and more problems, wasting time and energy and increasing the expenditure. As a result, this project has up to now consumed nearly 22 million rupees. The multiplication payment of compensation and the assistance represent a major component of this

colossal expenditure. Had the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources paid a lump sum of compensation against the losses suffered at the beginning such a gigantic expenditure would not have been incurred and much time and energy could have been saved.

However, finally the problem has now been solved. Wasting so much valuable time and a colossal sum of money in the fisheries management process of this dispute cannot be considered as a characteristic of good management.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Although, several management deficiencies were embodied in the programme for terminating the 3.5 t prawn trawling fishery in Chilaw, it has to be said that as a whole and historically, a permanent and specific solution to an age old problem in the fisheries management field in the region has been achieved. This can be considered as the only experience of this type that has ever occurred in the Island in the field of Fisheries Management.

## **8. REFERENCES**

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