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for information

Cyanide Fishing and Live Reef Fish Trade in Hong Kong

Purpose

This paper describes briefly cyanide fishing in relation to the live fish trade and efforts taken by Hong Kong to deal with the issue.

Background

2. In 1997 Hong Kong consumed about 28,000 tonnes of live marine fish. About 80% of them were cultured fish from local sources (about 3,000 tonnes) or imported from elsewhere. The majority of imported live marine fish are either airfreighted or shipped from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Australia. They vary greatly in size ranging from mariculture fry to Giant Grouper. Common species include a variety of groupers, wrasses and snappers. The live marine fish trade is valued at about \$1,600 million in 1997.

3. To meet the growing demand for live marine fish, there has been reports about the spreading of cyanide fishing particularly for those high-priced coral reef fish species such as Humphead Wrasse, Giant Grouper, High-finned Grouper and Coral Trout in the Asia Pacific region resulting in the possible over exploitation of certain fish species and the destruction of coral reefs in the region. These reef fish are often stunned with cyanide by divers and then kept alive and sent to the major consumer markets including Hong Kong as high-priced seafood. Such destructive fishing practice has led to growing international and local concerns.

Efforts being made by Hong Kong

4. Hong Kong considers that trade in live reef fish is a legitimate use of marine resources provided that it is conducted sustainably and responsibly. To assess the situation and to address the problem in the local context, the following action plan has been adopted since 1996 :-

- (i) Strengthening the collection of live fish trade statistics with a view to providing a more reliable basis for trade monitoring. Following an initiative made by the Agriculture and Fisheries Department (AFD) and with the assistance of the Census and Statistics Department, the codes for imported items under the Harmonized Code System were refined to distinguish the trade in various target fish species, including the Humphead wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*) and Giant grouper (*Epinephelus lanceolatus*). These two species were recently classified as "vulnerable" in the 1996 IUCN Red List because of concerns over their conservation status as a result of the trade;

- (ii) Reviewing and enhancing the effectiveness of the Fisheries Protection Ordinance which prohibits the use of dynamite and toxic substances including cyanide for fishing. Legislative amendments to the Ordinance have been drawn up to substantially increase the maximum fine for destructive fishing practices and to provide for the use of the any kind of apparatus for prohibition or restriction of fishing which is detrimental to fisheries and has a harmful effect on the marine ecosystem. We plan to introduce the amendments in the next legislative session;
- (iii) Increasing public awareness and education on fisheries protection, targeted at both the fishermen and the general public;
- (iv) Sampling of fish for cyanide testing. As part of their food surveillance programme, the Department of Health regularly samples fish for detection of cyanide at the retail markets. In addition, AFD also collects samples of live coral fish for cyanide testing at points of entry including mariculture facilities known to be used for temporary stocking of imported marine fish. So far no traces of cyanide had been detected in fish body and internal organs. We are not aware of any incident of health hazard caused by residues of cyanide; and
- (v) Strengthening international co-operation in information exchange and advocating for a regional action plan to curb destructive fishing.

Regional co-operation to address destructive fishing practices

5. Being an important importer of live reef fish and recognizing that regional cooperation is essential to address the issue, Hong Kong had taken the initiative to raise the issue at the APEC Marine Resources Conservation Working Group (MRCWG) Meeting in 1996. With APEC support, Hong Kong organised in December 1997 the "Workshop on the Impact of Destructive Fishing Practices on the Marine Environment" in collaboration with the Mainland and Chinese Taipei. Over 100 local and overseas participants attended the 3-day Workshop. More than 30 speakers presented their papers and took part in the Workshop discussions.

6. A number of recommendations were developed to address the problem during the Workshop discussions. These included management measures, information exchange, monitoring for cyanide residues, development of aquaculture, regulations on destructive fishing, public education etc. These recommendations would be presented to the next MRCWG Meeting in June 1998 and may lead to the development of more specific actions to deal with the issue in the regional context.

Hong Kong's constraints

7. Cyanide fishing occurs mainly in tropical coral reef areas outside Hong Kong's jurisdiction. It is far more effective for the producing economies which have direct control over these coral reef areas to tackle the problem at source, including the stepping up patrols and enforcement action, retraining fishermen involved in cyanide fishing, and setting up cyanide detection facilities. The chance of detecting cyanide residue when the fish arrive Hong Kong would be very low because the cyanide

residue would break down naturally and drop below detection level a few days after being caught. It is therefore impractical to set up a lab testing facility in Hong Kong to monitor cyanide residue in fish imports. It is important for the region as a whole to cooperate and take up the challenge. In this respect the APEC MRCWG would be a suitable forum to contemplate further concerted efforts.

The Way forward

8. Hong Kong would continue to participate actively in relevant APEC fora, particularly the MRCWG and Fisheries Working Group (FWG) with a view to formulating a regional action plan to curb destructive fish practices. Before a regional action plan is in place, Hong Kong will continue implementing our action plan as stipulated in paragraph 4 above.

9. The recommendations drawn up at Workshop held in Hong Kong in December 1997 would form a useful basis for the formulation of an action plan for the region and Hong Kong will take a proactive role in soliciting support and contributions from other APEC economies for its formulation. To continue our effort in this meaningful work, Hong Kong will also propose to host the MRCWG meeting in the year 2000.

Agriculture and Fisheries Department
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