

Climate change impact - 4 : Fishing grounds change, production falls, species disappear



A killa (dry fish processing firm) at Nazirartek in Cox's Bazar is found desolate due to shortage of rawfish. Several hundreds killa also face same fate there. The photograph has been taken in the middle of March this year.
NN photo

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Experts, businessmen, fishermen and fish workers based on their experience said the fishing zones and fish production in the coastal area are declining gradually over the years.

They attribute it to sea level rise, increase of salinity at coastal belt, frequent cyclone and change in the oceanic current pattern.

Decline in the export of dry fish is also indicative of sharp downward trend of fish production in the Bay.

Surprisingly, the Fisheries Department record showed that fish production is on the rise since 1997.

Fishery Statistical Yearbook published by the Department of Fisheries shows that catching of marine fish both industrial and artisanal is still increasing.

On the other hand, a recent survey carried out by the Bangladesh Fisheries Development Corporation (BFDC), said that fish resources in the economic zone of the Bay, have been declining by 25% to 30% over the last couple of decades.

The survey under the technical guideline and financial assistance of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) also revealed that around

100 important fish species have disappeared from the country's water territory in the Bay of Bengal over the last couple of decades.

Experts and marine fisheries officials mentioned that the catch in the Bay may rise as a result of modernisation of fishing method, particularly by using of trawls. But the overall marine fish production is declining, according to them.

Jafar Ahmed, a fish trader at Kutubdia in Cox's Bazar said both breeding and production of marine fish are declining day by day.

"Fishes are not available at the coastline as they prefer deep sea," he observed.

He blamed fishing by trawls is one of the reasons for the decline of fish and demanded stopping of the use of trawls for catching them.

Md Shahabuddin, another fish trader at Sonadia Island of Moheskhali upazila said Sonadia and Ghatibhanga were once fish sanctuaries but now they are bereft of fish following destruction of mangrove forest in the area.

Hamidur Rahman Azad, a lawmaker from Kutubdia-Moheskhali constituency said that fish resources in the Bay are being affected due to water pollution and sea level rise.

A senior official of Marine Fisheries Department preferring anonymity said marine fish is now on a downward trend due to change of fishing grounds.

There are four fishing grounds in Bangladesh. These are: Elephant Point, Kohinur Point and South of South Patch in Cox's Bazar and Sowatch of no Ground near the Sundarbans, according to him.

He said fishing grounds have changed following mega cyclones like the Sidr but no survey was conducted after the storm.

The Marine official also said that the overfishing in the Bay by trawls is also a reason for decline in fish production.

A total 154 trawls are now involved in catching fish in the Bay. But a survey conducted in 90s suggested that 70 to 80 trawls might be allowed to catch fish in the Bay," he said.

Prof Dr Ainun Nishat, country representative of IUCN, said fishing grounds are changing due to change in the oceanic current pattern and increase of salinity near the shore.

He referred that in 2007, the fishermen who used to catch mother shrimp in the deep sea had alleged that the shrimp were moving very close to the costal line due to increase of salinity.

Prof Nishat, also a leading environmentalist, said corals and the Sundarbans mangrove,

breeding grounds of many fishes, are being affected due to increase of salinity in water.

"Fishing grounds are changing due to change in the oceanic current pattern. That's why some fishes are going to the deep sea while some fishes come close to coast line," he observed.

According to Fishery Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh 2006-07, the growth rate of fish production was 4.79% in 2006-07 fiscal while it was 5.08% in 2005-06, 5.42% in 2004-05, 5.20% in 2003-04, 5.70% in 2002-03, 6.14% in 2001-02 and 7.20% in 2000-01 financial years.

According to the statistics, 35,391 tonnes of fish were caught by industrial (trawls) fishing and 452,047 tonnes by artisanal (mechanised and non-mechanised) boats in 2006-07 totaling 2,440,011 tonnes of marine fish catch.

The statistics show that 2,328,545 tonnes of marine fish were caught in 2005-06, 2,215,957 tonnes in 2004-05, 2,102,026 tonnes in 2003-04, 1,998,197 tonnes in 2002-03, 1,890,459 tonnes in 2001-02 and 1,781,057 tonnes in 2000-01.

The Fishery Statistical Yearbook showed that only 77 tonnes of dry fish were exported in 2006-07 fiscal as against 150 tonnes in 2005-06, 272 tonnes in 2004-05. The dry fish export was 2473 tonnes in 1993-94.

Visiting different killas (dry fish processing firms) in different areas, including Kutubdia, Moheshkhali, Sonadia and Nazirtek in Cox's Bazar in the middle of March this year this correspondent found no fish in most of the firms.

Nurul Islam, 42, a dry fish trader of Nazirartek in Cox's Bazar, said fish production has drastically fallen in recent years.

"The fish we used to buy at Tk 40 to Tk 42 per kg in the past now costs Tk 70 to Tk 75. We cannot earn profit for non-availability of fish and their price hike," he said.

Sura Khatun, 50 and some other women at a firm at Nazirartek said now-a-days they are not getting much work and it has made their living difficult.

Ferdous-ur-Rahman, Member Secretary of Network of Climate Change, Bangladesh, said the Hilsha fishery is losing breeding ground due to coastal and river bed sedimentation.

"Increased temperature in the water bodies of Bangladesh may also impact fisheries. Thus climate change poses a serious threat to the livelihood of fishermen," he observed.

Minister for Fisheries and Livestock Abdul Latif Bishwas recently told the Jatiya Sangsad that the country has a shortfall of 28,016 tonnes of fish at the moment and the government is taking various steps to augment fish production.

The Minister said the government has taken programmes to protect Jatka (hilsha fry), raise shrimp cultivation in sweet water and recover internal open water bodies to meet the fish shortage.

The fishing industry provides job to thousands of people through processing and supply, marketing and distribution.

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