

Chapter 37

Fishermen on the Batinah Coast in Oman: A Study from the Subsistence Marketplace Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Fishing is common among the inhabitants in every coastal region. Oman's Al-Batinah coast accounts for 20% of the national catch. However, poor uptakes of improved fishing technologies and practices, weak management, inefficiency and ineffective marketing have resulted in Al-Batinah fishermen securing low earnings (Al-Zabri, 2008). This study assesses the situation of the fishermen on the Batinah coast of Oman. It uncovers the reasons behind their leading a subsistence life. This study also explores their difficulties and concerns, and devises some policy implications that offer them a better life. The study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data collected from fishermen using questionnaires and interviews in an organized form of field survey. The majority of the fishing activity takes place in the traditional sector, where small fishermen run it as their family business. Expenditures surpass fishermen's income and restrict their savings and growth. The Omani Government has provided infrastructure; however, there is a need for officials to be more observant and concerned about the not so well off fishermen. Facilitators such as training institutes and banks need to provide concentrated measures to improve fishermen's skills and productivity. Altogether all the facilitators and the fishermen need to come together and share a common platform to advance fishing activity and its scope in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

Oman is one of the prominent countries of the Gulf region in the Middle East. It is known as the land of sailors and fishermen. The country has performed economically well over the past two decades and has developed infrastructure comparable to that of the developed world, especially in the construction of roads, hypermarkets, and other real estate. Strong economic advice that “there is an Omani fishing industry which could be stimulated and modernized” was put forward in 1972 for the development of Oman (Mallakh, 1972, p. 422). Unfortunately, it is still not worked out.

Oman’s coastline, which extends to 3,165 km, supports more than 150 species of fish and crustaceans. The total fish stock was estimated as 4.69 million tonnes in 2000 (MOI, 2000). However, the actual production was 504 tonnes in 2004 (FAO, 2010). Over the past 30 years, much has been done to expand and modernize this traditional industry. Nowadays, fresh fish is available even in remote towns where dried fish used to be carried on camels. Fish marketing has emerged as a lucrative business along with the growth in per capita income of Omanis, demand from the local and the expatriate community, and a flourishing hotel and restaurant sector.

The industry witnessed a major revival in 1978 with the introduction of the Fishermen’s Incentive Fund. This fund offered fishermen financial assistance for the purchase of small fiberglass boats, outboard engines, depth-finders, fish detection systems, and communications and miscellaneous equipment. In 1998, the fishing industry had 26,940 registered fishermen operating 12,248 small craft, which grew to 37,520 and 14,796 respectively in 2008. The Master Plan for the Economic Vision 2020 sets a growth rate of 5.6% for fisheries, and foresees that the industry will be equipped with new fishing harbors, boats, research laboratories, private sector joint ventures, and a fleet of modern trawlers. The Ministry of Fisheries Wealth (hereafter called

Ministry of Fisheries or Ministry) has also taken a number of steps to develop commercial fishing while conserving fish stocks and the livelihood of traditional fishermen. These include restricting fishing during some seasons, regulating the size of nets and equipment used in fishing, and defining the areas, depths, quantities, and kinds of fish that may be caught commercially (MOI, 2000). These regulations are designed to protect the traditional fishing industry and the fishermen, which are the prime focus of this study.

Traditional fishermen are the backbone of the fishing industry in Oman. However, their growth is not commensurate with that of the development witnessed elsewhere in Oman. While some fishermen have become better off, the majority are still struggling at, what can be termed as, subsistence level. Although Oman’s Al-Batinah coast accounts for 20% of the national catch, poor uptake of improved fishing technologies and practices, weak management, inefficiency and ineffective marketing have affected Al-Batinah fishermen to secure the lowest earnings among all fishermen in Oman (Al-Zabri, 2008). Currently, when other industries and jobs are unfolding to Omanis, some still have faith in this traditional occupation, either because of its growing profitability or as a matter of habitual life.

This study aims to assess the situation of the fishermen on the Batinah coast of Oman. It attempts to explore the reasons why fishermen lead a subsistence life in the region, what are their difficulties and concerns, and what could be done to offer them a better life.

Subsistence Marketplace and Oman’s Fishermen: A Review

Oman is an upper-middle income country but attracts the lowest GNI per capita of 14,330 USD (2007) among the six high-income Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in the Middle East¹. However, the situation of Oman is comparatively better than its Asian neighbors,

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