

Book Review

Michael Fabinyi. *Fishing for Fairness: Poverty, Morality and Marine Resource Regulation in the Philippines*. Asia-Pacific Environment Monograph Series Number 7. Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2012. 227 pages.

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The work of Michael Fabinyi can be appreciated for capturing in detail the perspectives or discourses by major sectors or groups of resources users in a fishing village in Coron, Palawan. Using a structural political ecology framework, he carried out fieldwork in 2006 with intermittent visits from 2005 to 2010. He lived primarily in an undisclosed fishing village he calls Esperanza and in multi-localities to make sense of and contrast fishers' frameworks with views beyond the village (e.g., views from the tourism industry, MPA or marine protected areas and live fish trade regulators, government agencies, and non-government organizations or NGOs).

The author spells out the heart of the discourse that fisher's use in negotiating their daily circumstances. The 'poor moral fisher discourse', Fabinyi explains, is an understanding held by fishers that associates legal fishing methods with being moral but which keeps them impoverished. 'Legal fishers' recognized that the methods they used did not contribute to the destruction of the environment unlike illegal fishing methods like blast fishing or cyanide use. Illegal fishing methods were known to give good income, but also to be very destructive to the marine ecosystem. Fishers felt that it was government officials' and enforcers' responsibility was to pursue and punish illegal fishers rather than penalize poor fishers by regulating their activities around MPAs.

'Poor moral fishers' appealed for pity and social justice from wealthier community members, government officials and law enforcers, and other patrons within and outside the village. For example, they asked boat owners to give them a place in a fishing crew, employment around the house, or access to personal credit. They implored government officials and enforcers to recognize their right to their livelihood and rejected regulation of their fishing activities (i.e. refusing suggestions of having closed seasons), or negotiated for a share from the user fees collected in the MPA dive sites.

This work candidly illuminates how the clash in perspectives between fishers, tourist operators, and MPA regulators complicate maintaining the integrity of the environment. The author tells of how fishers resented some MPAs located on their fishing grounds that hindered their access to

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resources. Sometimes, 'poor fishers' saw the instituting of MPAs and the user fees imposed on tourist divers and operators as rightfully theirs to claim. On the other hand, tourist operators complained about how the MPAs were tools to dispossess them of money instead of a means to protect the environment. They pointed out that the same fishers who charged them fees were seen fishing in the no take zones. The uncoordinated collection of fees by the tourism agents and dive operators, and fishers annoyed and turned tourists away. Such conflicts were more pronounced in sites that infringed upon poor fishers fishing grounds.

While Fabinyi recognized the importance of the fishers' views on which success or failure of interventions would depend, at the same time he saw that succumbing to the poor moral fisher discourse has its short-comings. While he does not generalize that all fishers thought in this manner, making them see their own contribution to the resource depletion is part of the challenge for conservation. The strength of ethnography as a method lies in including the views of the fishers who are directly targeted and impacted by conservation programs. The greater challenge is reconciling environmental management, tourism, and social justice goals.

Several more issues confronted by fishers in their daily struggles are amply discussed in the document, such as: How important social reciprocal relationships are in leveraging one's position. A prominent boat owner must generously give in to the requests of 'poor fishers' as this assures him of sustained cooperation (i.e. having an available workforce for packing and loading the catch), it also motivates fishers to work to the best of their abilities, and thus allows him to have a steady source of fresh fish for trading. Relationships are not always smooth however, nor do smooth relationships always assure of a fisher of a spot among the crew, or fair prices for their fish. Similarly, while fishers are somewhat beholden to their financiers, they can sell fish to another buyer. A great many factors do impact the daily negotiations and claims between and among fishers.

Fabinyi mentions a long list of problems that regularly confront fishers. Fishing generally requires high capital costs for equipment, specifically for boats and gears, which fishers are unable to provide. They resort to indebtedness, dependence on others for fishing operations, and become susceptible to exploitative relationships. Fishing is a highly seasonal activity. It is not an economically secure source of livelihood. The fact that fishers describe a large volume of fish catch translating into the elusive big income as a 'jackpot' alludes to each fishing trip as a gamble.

The author observes how a fisher today has to go farther away from family on longer and more costly trips while bringing home a smaller catch

because resources have steadily declined. They cope by shifting to exploit other fishery resources and expanding into new gears (*basnig* in the 70s, *largo* in the 80s, *fusilier* in 90s, then live fishing for export to China in 2000s). Fishing is extractive work and fishers in Esperanza are guided by practical knowledge and skillfully direct their fishing technology to how to maximize gain from their marine resources, rather than prioritize conservation for the long term. According to Fabinyi the fishers demonstrated a limited knowledge of biology. Their discourse was not based on ecological analysis but was framed by identity, location and morality. They easily blamed outsiders using illegal fishing methods for their resource degradation while obscuring the fact that legal fishing can be destructive. Fabinyi considers valorizing the poor as generally a dangerous approach.

He does admit that there are more environmentally extractive practices. The ‘poor fishers’ cannot rival the foreign commercial vessels that intrude into their fishing grounds, for instance. Foreign vessels are bold enough to enter within municipal waters and into supposedly protected areas like the Tubataha reef to exploit endangered species like sea turtles.

One understands how many young fishers dream of shifting out of fishing and out of poverty. But their social mobility is limited. Too few emerge from the rut of poverty and low status associated with fishing, and this includes respected boat owners since alternative economic prospects for them are nil. Many claim that they are generally happy as long as they are with their families. The history of progressive increase of fishers signifies that it is easier to enter fishing than leave it.

As one who spent about 5 years visiting and living in fishing villages in Bicol, Pangasinan, and La Union between the mid 80s and early 90s, I can relate with the familiar narratives and issues that the author describes. Sadly, the issues persist unresolved today. Fabinyi’s candor is probably what is needed to jolt resource users, managers, political leaders and enforcers into recognizing that we are all accountable for the conditions of our marine resources and habitats. The problem is that conservation issues are too complex to be treated with oversimplified solutions. I agree with Fabinyi that more sacrifices, making ‘hard choices’ and less compromise from various sectors may be needed if we seriously wish to make an impact.

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