

The Destruction of the Filipino Tuna Industry

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Marfenio Tan would like to roll back the state of the tuna industry a decade or so to where everybody was making money and production was more than enough to fatten the bank accounts of the tuna producers at this southern outpost of the Philippines.

Until retiring from the family-owned San Andres Fishing Industry several years ago, Tan was president of the second-biggest homegrown tuna producer in General Santos, once a dusty and laid-back port city of 550,000 on the Sarangani Bay at the bottom of Mindanao.

More than anybody else, Tan has seen the unprecedented growth of a multi-million dollar industry over the last four decades from a marginal source of livelihood to what is now a globally competitive – and threatened – industry. He was there at its birth. Now he has seen it crash. And the crash of Marfenio Tan's tuna fishery is a painful microcosm of what is going on today across the world.

According to a February 2008 report by the United Nations Environment Program entitled *In Dead Water*, "fishing capacity is now estimated to be as much as 2.5 times that needed to harvest the sustainable yield from the world's fisheries. Up to 80 percent of the world's primary catch species are exploited beyond or close to their harvest capacity, and some productive seabeds have been partly or even extensively damaged over large areas of fishing grounds. With many traditional, shallow fishing grounds depleted, fisheries (especially large industrial vessels/fleets operating for weeks/months at sea) are increasingly targeting deep-water species on the continental slopes and seamounts."

Bluefin tuna, the king of the species, are basically gone, according to a wide variety of studies. Yellowfin and skipjack are far more plentiful in the world's tropical oceans. But the fishermen of General Santos are the point men in seeing their decline.

Marfin, as Tan is known, stumbled onto what turned out into a gold mine when, on one of his purchasing trips to a local hardware outlet, he was asked by the owner if there were tuna in General Santos. The owner, a friend, happened to have some Japanese friends who were on a frenetic search for raw materials for canning.

When shown pictures of skipjack and yellowfin, Marfin couldn't believe that what they were catching in huge abundance was so in demand that Japanese were shopping around in General Santos City.

Within two months, the Japanese were already doing surveys in the city and in less than six, a Japanese cold storage ship was anchored several hundred meters from the shoreline of what was then Lion's Beach and is now, in homage to the industry, called Queen Tuna Park. In less than a month, the ship was full to the brim, so to speak, and it had to sail back to Japan way ahead of schedule.

Tan said the Japanese couldn't believe what they stumbled into. *"We used to bury some of our catches because there were simply no buyers and there were no cold storage facilities then,"* he said.

By the mid 1970s, fruit processing giant Dole Philippines Inc. could no longer resist the phenomenal growth of the tuna industry. Dolefil started to buy and pack fresh chilled yellowfin, which also rode into the rapid growth of the industry. Fishing boats and equipment began to evolve from small

trawlers called *censuro to unay*, or small purse seiners, to the super seiners that they are today. Fish aggregating devices, a product of Filipino ingenuity, also progressed from bamboo rafts to steel floaters. So did the engines of fishing boats from outrigger to refurbished cargo ships.

The number of fishing boats also soared. Tan said there were only 15 mother fishing boats when tuna fishing began as an industry in the early 1970s. It grew into around 40 small trawlers by the 1990s. Today, there are more than 200 mother fishing boats, a handful of them ocean-going super seiners. From net exporter of fresh catch, the industry grew into exporter of canned and processed tuna products. From a fringe livelihood and mostly underground economy, it has become a major revenue earner and a major global player in the tuna industry.

By the 1980s tuna canning plants had begun to sprout in General Santos. Where before excess catch were left to rot and buried on the shores, huge cold storage facilities now dotted the city, which is host to six of the country's seven major tuna processing plants.

But as more and more players joined the burgeoning industry, more hands dipped into the overall catch. It wasn't long after when efforts to cope up with the demand drove industry players to deploy more aggregation devices and to venture more and more into the open seas.

"The ratio of payaws and unay then was 10 to one (10 aggregation devices for every mother fishing boat)," Tan recalled. Now each set of fishing fleet requires up to 60 aggregation devices deployed at far beyond the mouth of Sarangani Bay.

"Before, we could already reach our FADs in three to 18 hours of sailing at six knots per hour. Today we sail between 10 to 36 hours at 10 to 12 knots to reach our fishing grounds," Tan said.

As a result, General Santos's tuna producers have forged agreements with host Western Pacific countries to enable them to meet growing quotas and demand for Philippine-manufactured and processed tuna products, acquiring fishing rights in Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Indonesia. Venturing into the high seas also led to the arrest of Filipino fishermen and seizures of their fishing boats in several countries such as Indonesia.

Eventually, the fishermen of General Santos put reality to the UNEP report. Last year, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) imposed a three-month tuna fishing ban in the tuna-rich migratory highway that cuts across the Western Pacific region. The move was in response to numerous studies pointing to declining tuna stocks due to overfishing and climatic changes. The Philippines, a signatory and member of the world body that oversees tuna fishing in the region, was among the countries affected by the ban.

Tan however said that the commission found the temporary ban not enough to replenish the tuna stock. As a result, the commission extended the ban to two years beginning this month. Tan, also president of the Socsargen Federation of Fishing and Allied Industry, said the ban covers a large area of traditional fishing grounds of Filipino tuna producers. The ban is particularly focused on fish aggregation device fishing.

The ban, however, only covers purse seine tuna fishing in international waters. *"We are still allowed to fish within our 200-mile exclusive economic zone,"* Tan said. Handline and long line tuna fishing, a traditional Filipino fishing method, is likewise exempted.

But one of the areas covered by the ban, at coordinates of 135 degrees to 152 degrees longitude and one degree to six degrees north of the equator, is a rich source of tuna stock, according to Tan. The area referred to by Tan covers more than 306,000 square miles of open seas south of Micronesia and north of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea where over 38 Philippine-flag purse seine fishing ships

are operating. Tan said the Philippines will have to comply with the ban under pain of being de-listed from WCPFC and jeopardizing the whole tuna industry in the country. The ban, he said, is likely to affect the country's annual tuna catch.

Industry sources forecast a 10 percent drop in global tuna catch. The WCPFC ban is part of a package of conservation measures, spread over a period of three years starting in 2009, aimed at reducing tuna mortality by a minimum of 30 percent from the 2001-2004 annual average.

Feeling the pinch

Although the ban is barely a month old, its effect is already being felt. Tan said fishing companies have started pulling out their aggregation devices in the no-fishing zone and redeploying them west of Mindanao and within the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone. Dexter Teng of TSP Fishing said as early as last year, when the three-month ban was imposed, they already started pulling out their aggregation devices.

But several tuna producers were caught flatfooted. onathan Quilat, who just finished building two fishing boats at a cost of P16 million each (US\$350,000), is now left holding an empty bag. The boats were supposed to sail in the no-fishing zone in the first quarter of this year.

"I will have to wait until the ban is lifted before deploying those boats," he said. "We hope the tuna stock will increase. Eventually these tuna will find their way to our territorial waters,"

In the long run, Marfin Tan acknowledges that the closure of international waters to tuna fishing will boost the local industry.

"That means tuna species will be able to spawn in the Moro Gulf and Celebes Sea where mature and adult tuna end the cycle of their migratory path," he added.

Tan nevertheless reckoned that it will take 10 to 15 years for the tuna stock to fully recover to the level of the 1960s during his fateful visit to the hardware store and his introduction to the Japanese looking for tuna. He urged the government to speed up research and to come out with empirical data on the state of tuna stocks in Philippine waters. Over the past five years, Philippine tuna catch have leveled off despite the increase in the numbers of fishing vessels.

"We want to know what is the current biomass of tuna species in the Celebes Sea (also known as the Sulawesi Sea) and Moro Gulf," Tan said. But he agrees that many fishermen will be displaced by the ban and if unregulated the retreat of tuna producers into Philippine waters could further strain tuna resources there.

Tuna fishing, according to the General Santos government, is a P50 billion (US\$1.08 billion) industry in the Philippines, contributing some 4 percent of gross national product, directly providing livelihood and employment to over a million Filipinos.

"Eighty percent of our vessel crew has not gone to college. Once they are displaced, it will cause a big problem," Tan said.

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