

From Drifting Nets to Shifting Horizons

Is transformation to tourism always a sustainable step?

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Introduction

Tourism is widely promoted as a sustainable livelihood alternative to unsustainable fishing practices. Marine fishing in India is increasingly losing its economic viability, and fishers have been seeking transitions away from fishing to other livelihoods, including the tourism sector.

However, when transitions are not planned holistically, they can undermine the very sustainability they aim to support, and may not benefit the fishers in the long term.

Here, we explore the shift from fishing to tourism in two contrasting Indian regions—Malvan (Maharashtra) and the Lakshadweep archipelago. Despite their geographic differences, both share common challenges. The study highlights how local contexts and drivers influence the course and consequences of this transformation. Are all shifts to tourism truly sustainable? These case studies challenge that assumption.

Methods

- Rapid qualitative research using semi-structured interviews (n = 14).
- Stakeholder categories: small-scale fishers, trawl fishers, association heads, restaurant owners, fisher women, and tourism workers



Results and Discussion

A Shore of Opportunities

Better value for fish catch

"Tourism helps keep the demand prices high despite the decline in catch." - Fisherwoman, Malvan

Supplementary livelihood and skill development

"Youngsters now know how to handle tourists, and have improved their skills a lot" - Secretary, Fishers Society, Lakshadweep

Reduced trawl boats number

"A decade ago, there were ~350 trawl boats, now only 30-35 are operational." - Trawl Boat Association Head, Malvan

It's a mixed bag of results!



Major themes

- Empowerment of youth and women
- Better domestic value for seafood
- Potentially reduces fishing pressure
- Increased domestic blue economy through local tourism
- Potential to reduce vulnerability through supplementary livelihoods
- No regard for the region's carrying capacity
- Inequitable development
- Unregulated growth of the tourism sector
- Eroding cultural identity

Where's the catch?

Loss of access to commons

"The government is giving our beaches to private investors - space we've relied on for generations. Once resorts are built, we'll be locked out of our own lifeline." - President, Fisherman Co-operative Society, Lakshadweep

Fishing pressure persists

"The decline in trawling pressure has been negated by other destructive practices like purse seining, LED fishing, and trawlers from other regions keep pressure high, leaving limited scope for fish stock recovery". - Fisherman, Malvan

Off-track development priorities

"Basic services such as cargo transportation, waste management, and drinking water facilities are still not being developed in tandem." - Resort operator, Lakshadweep

Increased substance abuse

"Earlier, alcoholism was the primary concern, but now drug use among youth in fishing communities is becoming increasingly prevalent" - Fish agent, Malvan

Conclusion

Tourism has great potential to boost the blue economy and can serve as a safety net for fishing communities by empowering and providing them with supplementary livelihoods.

However,

Ongoing tourism development plans are primarily intended to boost the blue economy, but not to support the fishing communities. Although this provides incidental benefits to them, it can have further consequences such as:

- Unconsulted tourism strategies risk disrupting local communities and ecosystems.
- Reduced fishing pressure from one source can be easily replaced by another.
- Tourism as a sole livelihood can push the communities to vulnerability in times of distress.
- Complete transition to tourism can lead to a loss of cultural identity.

References

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Scan for the digital poster

