**Testing the attitudes of fishers towards conservation; a snapshot**

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**Abstract**

A study was conducted in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay under the GEF Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project with the objective of understanding the attitudes of coastal fishermen towards conservation and sustainable use of marine resources including the conservation of the Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) and seagrass meadows. Information was gathered via focused interviews using 42 respondents from different fishing communities along the coast from Valaipadu in the Palk Bay to Mullikulam in the Gulf of Mannar in May 2017. The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire using 82 questions mainly on awareness on the status of resources, willingness to participate in conservation and constraints to conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources. Results showed that more than 90 % of the respondents had agreed that resources were dwindling and that fishing would not be sustainable in the future. Regarding management responsibility for conservation of marine resources, 65 % stated that the communities have the responsibility to manage while 28 % stated that it would be the responsibility of the government. Awareness on marine conservation was relatively high; 85 % stated that marine resources need protection and 90 % responded that marine resources have to be sustainably utilised. More than 80 % of the fishermen were aware that many marine species were threatened including the Dugong. The willingness for conservation and sustainable utilization of marine life among fishermen exceeded 90 % of the sample when asked whether they are willing to support conservation, law enforcement and knowledge dissemination. With regard to constraints in protecting resources 28% stated that corruption was one of the main causes for continuation of destructive and illegal fishing methods. Lack of law enforcement and negligence by government officials in implementing regulations were other issues raised by the communities. In conclusion it can be stated that the level of awareness on the need to conserve and sustainably use resources is high among fishermen and they are willing to serve as ambassadors of marine life conservation if they are empowered to do so. The twin goals of conservation and sustainable utilization are achievable in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay if coastal communities are engaged using appropriate management tools in conservation and management of marine resources.

Keywords: Coastal fishing, Conservation, Sustainable utilization, Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay