

Science-driven policy change to restore healthy fish stocks in Myanmar

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In Myanmar, the Hilsa shad is a critical fish for local livelihoods, nutrition, and ecosystems. However, Hilsa stocks in the region were discovered to be near economic collapse from overfishing and habitat degradation.

To reverse this loss of biodiversity, WorldFish and its partners kicked off a series of research programs to better understand Hilsa in the region, the drivers of its decline, and potential solutions. Researchers found the small-scale Hilsa fishery sector could be worth between \$790 million and \$1 billion per year, with more than 1.5 million fishers and market chain actors dependent on the fish for their livelihoods. They also discovered that more sustainable Hilsa management could help protect the Irrawaddy dolphin, a near-extinct species in the region.

A set of policy briefs, informed by the evidence, were presented to the government in Myanmar. One proposed policy to help protect Hilsa stocks included no-take zones, as ineffective enforcement often leads to overexploitation of coastal resources. Industrial bottom trawling, a type of fishing that drags large nets across the seafloor, also damages aquatic environments. Increased monitoring and surveillance can help check and restrain this practice.

As a result, a series of science-driven policies to protect Hilsa stocks were passed in critical regions of the country. Governments and local agencies implemented a closed season aligned with the peak spawning period identified by the research and designated 12 fish sanctuaries along key fish migration routes to protect the juveniles.

These newly enacted policies to protect the aquatic habitats of Hilsa will not only help revive ecosystems but will also ensure sustainable livelihoods and nutrition for the millions of fishers, related workers, and their families in Myanmar.