
ROUNDTABLE

Reviews of John G. Butcher, *The Closing of the Frontier: A History of the Marine Fisheries of Southeast Asia, c. 1850-2000* with a Response by John G. Butcher¹

Søren Byskov¹

(Fisheries and Maritime Museum, Esbjerg, Denmark)

John G. Butcher has written a book that aims to give a detailed account of the development of marine fisheries in Southeast Asia over a period of about 150 years. Needless to say, it is an overwhelming task. The region covers some of the world's leading fishing nations, each of which is a large and complex region of extensive maritime activities – countries like Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. From the perspective of “pushing forward the frontier,” the author has given himself a *leitmotif* to guide him through countless varieties and local developments. His main focus in every case study is the reaction of fish resources to the pressure placed upon them by commercial fishing activities. In other words, the book has a main axis consisting of subjects [fishermen], objects of desire [marine resources], and the relation between the two in the form of constant ingenuity in the search for new resources and fishing methods.

¹Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/>] and Leiden: KITLV Press [www.kitlv.nl], 2004. xxii + 442 pp., maps, figures, notes, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index. S \$69.90, US \$50.50, € 30, cloth; ISBN 981-230-259-X (ISEAS), 90-67-18-245-1 (KITLV). S \$39.90, US \$28.50, paper; ISBN 981-230-223-9 (ISEAS).

¹Søren Byskov <sb@fimus.dk> is Curator at the Fisheries and Maritime Museum in Esbjerg, Denmark, and Assistant Research Professor at the Centre for Maritime and Regional Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. He has published on the Danish North Sea fisheries, concentrating on the west-coast fish meal and fish oil industry and the development of twentieth-century fisheries from the major Danish fishing ports. In 2005 he defended his doctoral thesis entitled “Changes in Danish Coastal Culture: Coastal Landscape, Cultural History and Nature Management in the 20th Century” (to be published in Danish in 2006).

future” section might be cited as oversights, although this reviewer is disinclined to push this too rigorously. Similarly, in such a broad book, it is churlish to point to omissions or to take issue with generalizations. Bravo, well-done and thanks to the author for producing the story of the Southeast Asian marine fisheries.

Bob Pokrant¹

**(South Asia Research Unit, Curtin University of Technology,
Perth, WA, Australia)**

Butcher's book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the history of fisheries. The book focusses on the “extension of the frontiers of fishing” into existing and new fishing grounds and untapped ecological systems in maritime Southeast Asia between 1850 and 2000, which eventually led to stagnation and decline in fish catches and to the closing of the fishing frontier. The main country focus is the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. Butcher provides a broad-ranging overview of the shift from abundance to scarcity in aquatic resources and identifies some of the major agents responsible for this shift. To do this he adopts what he calls a chronological rather than a thematic approach to his subject matter, dividing the 150-year period into three broad and overlapping temporally and thematically defined categories: 1870s to the 1930s, during which time existing technologies were used to catch more fish in existing and new fishing grounds; a second phase from the 1890s to the 1930s in which new technologies allowed more intensified fishing and further geographic and ecological extension of the fishing frontier; and a third phase, from 1945 to the 1990s, when fishing activity accelerated into new fishing grounds to serve growing regional and international demand and meet the new development objectives of the regional states. This periodization is thematically informed and drives the narrative. Butcher states that he wants to show the reader how fishers scoured the seas for fish, how this was shaped by largely land-based changing political-economic circumstances, and how fish were marketed and traded to supply largely Southeast Asian consumers. To do this he draws together a wealth of largely English language official, academic and popular documentary material to support his general argument that the main drivers of change were expanding regional and inter-

¹Bob Pokrant <B.Pokrant@curtin.edu.au> is Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Faculty of Media, Society and Culture and Director of the South Asia Research Unit in the Division of Humanities at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia. His research interests are the history and development of fisheries and aquaculture in South Asia; shrimp farming and coastal management in Bangladesh and Tamil Nadu; disasters and development; and global food chains, fisheries and aquaculture in South Asia. His most recent book, co-authored with N. Quddus and A.A. Rahman, is *Shrimp Farming and Industry: Sustainability, Trade and Livelihoods* (Dhaka, 2006).

national consumer markets, government policies promoting expansion in fishing capacity, technical innovations in capture fishing methods to exploit existing and untapped fishing grounds and fisher and non-fisher investor/entrepreneurs ready to invest and organize expanded fishing activities. He pays particular attention to the role of Japanese and Thai trawlers in the exploitation of distant waters. These drivers shape the empirical materials presented, which include detailed descriptions of methods of capture, fish species caught, and, more unevenly, the people who fished.

The issue I wish to take up in this review concerns the conceptual framework used in the study, particularly the place accorded to what Butcher defines as "small-scale" fishers in the extension of the fishing frontier, and the substantive and methodological consequences it has for the study. Butcher begins his account with the following statement:

"small-scale" fishers – those belonging to a category that came into existence after World War II to refer to fishers who did not take part in the emerging technologically advanced, capital-intensive sector – do not feature as prominently in this account as they might in view of the fact that they form the overwhelming majority of fishers. [26]

While it is true that larger-scale, mechanized fishers are largely responsible for the depletion of global fish stocks and for the closing of the fishing frontier, the statement uncritically accepts the popular and official dichotomy between a progressive, innovative and profit-driven industrial fishing sector and a traditional or less modern, less progressive, more passive, less innovative and even anti-modern small-scale or artisanal fishing sector dominated by thousands of long-established communities of inshore fishers scattered throughout the coastal environments of the region.² Its effect is to underplay the actual complexity of the great variety of fishing peoples and cultures of the region, the highly diverse set of production relations, labour processes and organizational features found among them, the diverse ways fishers are linked to local and regional political-economic structures, the dynamic nature of the relationship between small-scale fishers and the industrial/trawling sector and the independent role played by some small-scale fishers in the expansion of the fishing frontier. The term "small-scale" fishers is conceptually inchoate and has different empirical referents, being used to describe anything from single persons hook-and-line fishing, operating beach seine nets or fishing from canoes and catching fish for home and local consumption to organ-

²James R. McGoodwin, *Crisis in World Fisheries: People, Problems, and Policies* (Stanford, CA, 1991).

ized teams of fishers operating from motorized launches, employing non-family labour, ranging over wide areas and catching single species for export markets.³

Butcher's own narrative gives examples of what I consider to be small-scale fishers playing a more active and innovative role in fishing than he initially states (though he rarely refers directly to them in this way). Thus, chapter 4, entitled "Catching more with the same technology, 1870s to 1930s" (a revealing title in itself) and which covers a good sixty or more of the 150 years covered in the book, provides several examples of local, inshore fishers taking the initiative in expanding their fishing activities. To take one example, in the Rokan estuary on Sumatra's north coast, Butcher shows that in the late nineteenth century to the 1900s, it was local fishers, albeit some of them Chinese immigrants, who organized into groups and used fishing stakes (*jermal*) to catch fish for distant markets. After 1900, they made changes to their fishing technology to allow the catching of shrimp and moved further offshore up to 1929. Well into the 1930s, there were further extensions using new nets. However, Butcher is correct to point out that the technologies used reached the limits of their effectiveness so that fishing beyond thirty kilometres offshore required new technologies. Butcher concludes this chapter with the observation that up to the 1930s, "The great bulk of fish captured in Southeast Asian waters was still caught with fishing gears and vessels that differed little except sometimes in size from those being operated in the mid-1800s." [73] Also, while the fishing frontier expanded during this period, Butcher comments that "by 1940 a very large proportion of the fish caught both by traditional fishing methods such as fishing stakes and by some of the newly introduced methods such as *muro ami* was captured in inshore waters." [165]

These observations suggest that for up to ninety of the 150 years covered in the book, small-scale fishers played a greater, if difficult to quantify, role in the intensification if not the expansion of fishing than Butcher recognizes, particularly in adapting existing technologies (boats, nets) for more intensive and extensive fishing. It was after 1945 when regional states adopted new nation-building and economic development agendas to supply growing national, regional and international markets that what Butcher calls "the great fish race" accelerated the pace of fishing expansion based on trawling. Even then some small-scale fishers played a part in the expansion. For example, in chapter 6 Butcher shows that in Malaysia in the early 1960s inshore fishers with capital switched to trawling in response to poaching by other trawlers. In 1960, in the Philippines, "the Abines family recruited the small army of divers and swimmers needed to undertake this form [*muro ami*] of fishing on such a large scale." [192] Again, in the 1960s, "Thai fishers began converting their purse seiners to trawling." [195] In the 1970s in the Philippines, Butcher discusses the expansion of large

³David K. Schorr, *Artisanal Fishing: Promoting Poverty Reduction and Community Development through New WTO Rules on Fisheries Subsidies* (Tokyo, 2005).

fishing companies into tuna fishing, noting that "One of the most remarkable aspects of this *payaw* [fishing for tuna] fishery was the symbiotic relationship that quickly developed between the purse seiners and the handliners fishing from small boats." [190] In Thai waters in the 1980s, small-scale fishers pioneered the capture of squid before trawler operators moved in when it became profitable to do so. [201] From the 1970s to the 1990s, Butonese fishers fished out trochus shells in various parts of Indonesia. [274] In these and other cases, local fishers were sometimes pressured into new fishing activities as a result of the negative impact of trawling on their fishing grounds. However, they also took the initiative and adapted to changing circumstances.

In addition to fishers acting independently and thereby contributing to expansion of the fishing frontier, an important question raised but insufficiently recognized in Butcher's account is the changing relationships that developed during the period between so-called small-scale fishers and larger operators. Butcher's material suggests that the small-scale/industrial fisheries divide was already becoming blurred in the first half of the period under study and that many small-scale fishers expanded their fishing range through mechanization, fishing in deeper waters and working as sub-contractors, wage labourers and bonded workers to larger financial interests. Some moved out of fishing to become fish traders, middlemen and investors while others shifted into non-fishing-related work. Along with trawl fisheries, small-scale fishers also contributed to the destruction of fishing grounds as they sought ways of sustaining their livelihoods. Governments were crucial in determining which fisheries sectors were supported in expanding their operations. In other words, local fishers were drawn both willingly and unwillingly into new economic and political fishing and non-fishing relationships rather than simply being bypassed by the tide of marine history. These relationships are central to the understanding of the book's main objective to show how larger financial and commercial interests were able to extend the fishing frontiers. Butcher takes us so far in this understanding. What is now required is for researchers to build on Butcher's seminal work by examining in greater detail the issues raised.

I suggest that one way in which this can be done involves a closer engagement between anthropological and historical approaches to the study of marine (and other) fisheries. Historians draw increasingly on anthropological accounts and oral testimonies in their study of historical subjects and are taking a more ethnographically informed approach to the interpretation of historical sources. While Butcher refers to several anthropological studies, he uses them in a de-contextualized manner so that the reader does not hear the voices of the fishers, gets little sense of who they were, the communities and regions in which they were embedded, what they thought about their activities and the activities of other small-scale and industrial fishers, whether or not they wished to change their fishing operations, the obstacles placed in their way in doing so and how they saw their role in the widening fisheries sector.

Butcher relies largely on documentary sources and does not appear to have interviewed any fishers or observed systematically their activities. Talking to fishers would have allowed him to “cross-examine” some of the documentary sources, to foreground fishers’ accounts more effectively and thereby to provide a more ethnographically grounded perspective on their involvement in the expansion. While official and other more public material tell us something about the broader social, political and economic structures within which fishers lived and worked, they reveal less about how they thought, felt and acted. From my reading of Butcher, many of the official documentary sources he used focus on “hard” data such as fish caught, trawlers commissioned, new technologies adopted and taxing and leasing arrangements, not on the intersection of fishers’ life worlds with the expanding fishing economy.

Despite these criticisms, Butcher gives a valuable overview of the end of what can be called the productionist era in fishing in Southeast Asia. Along with other studies of open capture fisheries, his account suggests we are witnessing the end of the “hunting-and-gathering” phase in the world’s oceans and an enclosing of the aquatic global commons, similar in some respects to the closing of the terrestrial hunting and gathering frontier over the past five thousand years.

As an historian, Butcher is cautious in his comments about the future of open capture fishing. However, research in human geography, anthropology, economics, fisheries science and political economy demonstrate that the production, distribution and exchange of seafood is now part of a global food system and seafood products travel across inter-continental food chains to all parts of the world.⁴ There are signs of a shift from the productionist ethos of the era covered by Butcher to what Lang and Heasman refer to as an “ecologically integrated paradigm,” that is, a more ecologically responsible approach to food production, including seafood.⁵ In fisheries this manifests itself, *inter alia*, in the growth of new global and regional seafood quality and safety regulatory regimes, shifts to more extensive fish and shrimp farming and ecological aquaculture schemes, more integrated coastal and ocean management strategies, the creation of fish sanctuaries and marine parks, the revitalization of marine ecosystems and ecosystem-based community management of fisheries. While many of the themes examined so skilfully by Butcher will continue to form part of future research programs in history, anthropology and other disciplines, they will be paralleled by collaborative and trans-disciplinary investigation of these new frontiers of research.

⁴Neils Fold and Bill Pritchard (eds), *Cross-Continental Food Chains* (London and New York, 2005).

⁵Tim Lang and Michael Heasman, *Food Wars: The Global Battle for Mouths, Minds and Markets* (London, 2004).