**Sahir Advani: Mid-term Field Research Report**

**Robin Rigby Trust: Collaborative Coastal Research Award**

My field season between October 2016 and May 2017 has been extremely beneficial to my PhD research. I am very grateful for the funds I received from the Robin Rigby Trust which made travel and research in the remote archipelago of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) possible. Having previously worked on marine conservation issues in the Andaman Islands, I am grateful for the opportunity to return to this area and undertake research that will have broader implications on fisheries and value chain management in the larger archipelago. My methodological approach involves extended periods of interaction with fishing communities in order to foster meaningful, culturally and locally contextualized research outputs. Over the course of my field season, I was able to interact with fishers (both male and female), women fish vendors, middlemen, and fish exporters from four broad cultural groups.

The broader purpose of my research is to incorporate ecological, economic, and ethical considerations into fisheries and value chain management in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Documenting the inequities in value chains along with the landscape of values held by local communities would result in my research providing appropriate recommendations to policy makers. The finer scale objectives of my research are to 1) understand the complicated and non-linear effects of global seafood markets on the social and cultural aspects of fisheries, and 2) through a more collaborative and participatory process, describe commonalities and conflicts in value expressions of multiple cultural groups.

Conducting locally and culturally contextualised research through in-depth, nuanced, and participatory methods has given me the opportunity to locate my research in the wider fields of social-ecological systems, ethics, and sustainability. It has also provided me with a better understanding of the risks and delays involved in conducting collaborative and participatory research with small-scale fishing communities. This new-found recognition is why I was unable to achieve some of the objectives I had set out to do, such as the focal group discussions and participatory workshops. The reasons for, and my strategies to overcome, this hurdle will be discussed further on in this report.

**Methodology**

The research methods I intended to use during the course of the field season were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, value ranking exercises, and focus group discussions. The participant observation method involved spending extended periods of time with fishing communities at landing sites and observing their interactions with each other. The semi-structured interviews consisted of five broad topics:

1. Individual and community characteristics,
2. Fish commoditization,
3. Fishery management and characteristics,
4. Market and infrastructure characteristics, and,
5. Future prospects and discount rates.

Questions about individuals and communities were meant to understand the history of settlement and nature of interactions with marine ecosystems and other cultural groups. Drivers of trade, price trends, and histories of fisheries for exported seafood commodities were explored in the fish commoditization section. Details about the nature and dynamics of seafood value chains were uncovered through questions about market infrastructure. The last topic, future prospects and discount rates, was meant to explore the dependence of communities on fishing, their value orientations, and forward-thinking nature. Of these, lines of questioning about discount rates were dropped after trial interviews, as respondents did not seem to understand the nature or purpose of the questions. Respondents mentioned that such questions were very contextual to the fishing season or if their catch had been good or poor. This finding highlights the need for flexibility in research involving communities.

Of the methods listed above, I was unable to utilize the latter two – value ranking exercises and focus group discussions – as the level of detail required to develop these methods has not been analysed as yet. The results from the participant observation and semi-structured interviews are meant to explore emergent values or value statements that are locally and culturally contextualised. Coding and analysing these interviews is a task I am currently involved in, and I presented some of the preliminary results at the MARE People and the Sea IX conference in Amsterdam on 6th July 2017. After I have analysed and determined these values and value statements, with the help of local artists I will develop graphical or pictorial representations that will be iteratively ground tested to produce a final set of value cards for value ranking exercises. Focus group discussions using results from value ranking exercises will be used to explore commonalities and conflicts amongst communities and across the value chain. The development of the value cards and their ground testing will be conducted between October and December 2017, while the value ranking exercises and focus group discussions will be undertaken between January and June 2018.

During my interactions with community leaders and interviews with respondents I explored the feasibility of conducting group discussions and the nature of proposed workshops. When individuals were made aware of the nature and breadth of my research, they suggested that I conduct many small group discussions and some large workshops during my next field research trip after I had collected more data. Many individuals stated that there was an urgent need for a reconsideration of fishing practices, management, and trade, but that for such dialogue to be meaningful one common platform would not be feasible or effective. These valuable suggestions are being incorporated into my research plans for the upcoming field season.

**Summary of field experiences**

I am appreciative of the opportunity to return to the Andaman Islands and conduct research that will be beneficial to small-scale fisher livelihoods. I consider some individuals who I have worked with on past projects to be close friends and trusted allies. While such pre-existing relationships have their advantages in field work, there can also be disadvantages accompanying them. I often found it hard to schedule interviews with such individuals as they were informal about timings or surprised when I formally asked for their ethical consent. As a result, I got very few interviews amongst the Bengali community in Wandoor, despite spending significant amounts of time there. While interacting with the Bengali community in North Andaman, it was interesting to note that the individuals who first started fishing in the village had learnt fishing techniques not from other Bengalis, but from the nearby Karen community who would fish in the waters just outside the village.

This field season involved my first visit to the very restricted Nicobar group of islands. Maintained as a Tribal Reserve, these islands had a very small non-indigenous population who were mostly involved in administrative departments, small scale agriculture and business. The Nicobar Islands were some of the worst affected by 2004 tsunami, resulting in once populous indigenous communities now living scattered across these islands in much lower densities. Signs of the tsunami are still apparent in the form of flooded stretches of forests and submerged buildings, and memories of loss still fresh in people’s minds. While indigenous communities in the Nicobars are considered as one homogenous entity by government agencies, each island has its own dialect, customs, traditions, and culture. I was able to conduct 23 interviews with these indigenous communities, and some of the noteworthy findings were signs of erosion of traditions and integration into the commercial mangrove crab trade. On the island of Chowra I was very fortunate to have the help of two field assistants from the community who not only acted as translators, but took detailed notes during the interviews and crosschecked their notes with mine. They introduced me to the harsh realities of living on a remote island with very little freshwater, as well as the joys of communal life. I am indebted to David and Eben for all their help, and have been invited back to participate in the annual pig festival in November.

I was also keen to interact with the commercial fishing community in Campbell Bay, the southernmost town in the archipelago. I was able to interview 9 fishers, 4 traders, and 2 women fish vendors from this community. These individuals were originally from mainland India and were settled in the Nicobars in the 1970s in order to supply fish to government officials stationed there. Effectively isolated from chilled and frozen seafood value chains, these communities have adapted to their local environment and are involved in dried fish and live crab trade. Fresh fish caught by this community can only make it as far as the northernmost Nicobar island which is a two day journey by ship. Despite their physical and economic isolation from niche markets for chilled seafood products, individuals from these communities are well-versed in the trade lingo operating in the developed seafood markets in Port Blair.

While conducting research with the close-knit Karen community in Middle Andaman, I had the opportunity to stay at my field assistant’s house. After the first day there, I was accepted as a member of the household and was soon a participant in inside jokes about the neighbours and the community. Warm interactions such as these not only boost my morale to conduct research in isolated communities, but also highlight the important role that in-depth and prolonged field research play in understanding the values and social-ecological systems of small-scale fishing communities. Despite having completed a sufficient number of interviews in the community (22 male fishers, 4 female fishers, and 3 traders) and departing, I was invited back to celebrate Easter with the community. This was a beneficial experience, as I had the opportunity to have a long discussion with the local pastor about problems faced by the community, especially in terms of dwindling fish stocks and shrinking mangrove stands. As the religious leader of the local community, the pastor suggested that I utilize his communication network to disseminate information about the next workshop I plan.

A prominent focus of this field season was to understand the degree with which local communities are integrating with commodity chains for niche seafood products. A focal species being considered is the commodity chain for the leopard coral grouper, *Plectropomus leopardus,* which in some parts of the island is known as *dollar* due to the profits it brings in. Based on my preliminary understanding of transmission of price information for this species, off-the-boat prices are not distributed evenly across the archipelago, and even in areas with the highest prices (closest to export markets), the prices are 6 times lower than the wholesale price in Hong Kong. I will be utilizing the findings from this field season to explore the value that local communities attributed to *P. leopardus* before it became commoditized, the consequences of its current high value on inter community interactions, and integration with commodity chains. These preliminary results were presented at the MARE People and the Sea IX conference in Amsterdam on 6th July 2017, and a research article will be submitted for peer review by December 2017. I will inform the Robin Rigby Trust and my affiliate institution, Dakshin Foundation, about these and other future publications.

My research is the first study to document the multi-cultural aspects of seafood value chains in India, as well as one of the few to record indigenous fishing practices in the Nicobar Islands. Given the history of communities on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the nature of their interactions with commodity chains, this study affords me the unique opportunity to study the interactions between different cultural groups and commodities and the values underlying these interactions. Through data collected during the next field season, these aspects will be teased apart and their mechanisms described in research articles. Of relevance to local and sustainable development, the findings will be used to inform better fisheries and value chain management in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago.

**Future research plans**

My research plans continue to grow and evolve. In the first week of June, I attended a workshop on Spatial Agent-Based Modelling organized by the Socio-Environmental Synthesis Centre (SESYNC), Annapolis. Incorporating this approach into my research will allow me to further explore the interactions between communities, their values, and market infrastructure. I will be ground-truthing this model with data on catch landings, fish exports, fisheries and market infrastructure collected during the field seasons.

**Request for no-cost extension to field research**

I would once again like to thank the Robin Rigby Trust for funding my research through their Collaborative Coastal Research Award. My research on the values of multi-cultural fishing communities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the influence of seafood commodity chains on them is a result of collaborations between Dakshin Foundation and coastal communities of these islands. I have also been fortunate enough to receive additional funding from the International Development Research Centre’s (IDRC) Doctoral Research Award. This has allowed me to expand and further develop the focus of my research in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for another field season. I intend to utilize value ranking exercises to uncover underlying values and conduct the group discussions and workshops that I was unable to do during the Oct 2016 - May 2017 field season. While I had previously requested, and received approval for, a no-cost extension to my field research until February 2018, I would now like to extend this further by four months until July 2018. With this additional extension I will be able to complete the objectives I had set out to do and see the results of this research to completion.