

**THREE CHEERS FOR THE FISHERIES BIOLOGIST...
... AND AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S *ORATIO PRO DOMO***

Rob van Ginkel

University of Amsterdam
r.j.vanginkel@uva.nl

Casting his net widely, biologist Daniel 'Fishing Down the Food Chain' Pauly in a handful of pages draws up the balance sheet of social science's contribution to fisheries policy and management. Unsurprisingly, he assesses its impact as rather poor. From his Google quick scan it would appear that sociologists and anthropologists do not really count in fisheries science and policy. In looking for an answer as to why this should be so, Pauly turns to the social scientists' 'research mode'. He admits to putting things 'stereotypically' in remarking that social scientists 1) neglect key variables (that is, catch estimates) and 2) fail to propose and test models of social behaviour that are sufficiently general so as to be useful for policy making.

While Pauly is looking for intrinsic reasons for social science's poor performance, one could find a rather simple answer as to why sociologists and anthropologists are less visible in a Google search than biologists or economists. For one thing, their relative numbers make an important difference. Compared with biologists and economists, there are not many sociologists and anthropologists who focus on fisheries 'stuff' and those who do have begun to do so rather recently, usually for a limited period of time and with an emphasis on the developed world and large-scale fisheries. For example, the sub-discipline of maritime anthropology or anthropology of fishing developed in the 1970s and it was only in the late 1980s that many of its practitioners moved from more general issues of culture and social organisation to a predominantly applied type of anthropology dealing with policy and management issues. As newcomers to the fisheries scene, their access to institutions where biologists and economists were firmly established has not been easy and their voice is hardly heard. Contributing to the discourse in fisheries science and playing a role in fisheries policy and management requires quite another position than being relegated a place in the periphery. The fact that biologists and economists -- according to Pauly in contradistinction to anthropologists -- have been willing to develop generalisations has little to do with this.

As to Pauly's remarks regarding social science's research mode, they are indeed stereotypical. To begin with, he says little about what anthropologists and sociologists in fact *have done* or *do*; he limits himself to the question of what they *could do*. Pauly hardly cites social science publications at all but more than a third of his references are to work authored or co-authored by him. Consequently, what Pauly says about fisheries social science boils down to unsubstantiated guesswork. Apart from this ill-informed point of departure, I fail to see why social scientists should be better positioned than biologists to collect Third World small-scale fisheries catch statistics. It is not -- nor should it be -- their core business to do so. The fact that Pauly refers to Bob Johannes's *Words of the Lagoon* in this connection is interesting, for despite his commendable crossing of disciplinary

boundaries the late Johannes was trained as a marine biologist not an anthropologist. Anthropologists and sociologists should focus on the social and cultural dimensions of fishing and fishing communities. Although making occasional laudable remarks, Pauly succeeds in painting a caricature of anthropology. Clifford Geertz is the straw man who receives a bashing for his emphasis on the local context. However, being sensitive to the local context and offering 'descriptions of localised situations' do not mean that anthropologists fail to go beyond the community. On the contrary, if anything anthropological work is usually comparative at root. Although perhaps not the kind of 'general models' Pauly would like to see, anthropologists have come up with heuristic models, testable hypotheses and syntheses in regard to fisheries and fishing communities -- even quite early on (compare: Smith 1977).

Pauly's own 'Malthusian overfishing of small-scale fisheries' model is certainly useful and goes beyond the generic 'anthropogenic causes' to which many biologists and ecologists refer when explaining overfishing. But his self-congratulatory stance apparently prevents him from taking a serious look at what social scientists have indeed contributed to understanding the modes of behaviour and thinking of fisher folk -- whether they can be generalised or not. At any rate, perhaps anthropologists would do well not to indulge in developing general models too much. They do a much better job at inventorying socio-cultural adaptations to marine environments, the wants and needs of fishermen and fisher families, and the social impact of management measures -- intended and unintended, anticipated and unanticipated, desirable and undesirable. Precisely because of their sensitivity to local contexts, they are good at translating and mediating bottom-up desires and interests and at proposing rules and regulations that stand a better chance of being complied with than the top-down command-and-control regimes usually favoured by biologists and economists. If we take into account the present state of the world's fish stocks, the record of what generalising biologists and economists have been able to achieve in the fisheries policy and management arena does not merit any self-righteous demeanour. There would be much to gain for the fisheries and fisher folk if social and natural scientists began to communicate across the discursive rifts of their respective disciplines. That, by the way, was what Bob Johannes did and what made him an inspiring pioneer. But unilaterally and haughtily telling social scientists what they could -- or should -- do is not much help.

References

- Smith, M.E.
1977 Comments on the Heuristic Utility of Maritime Anthropology. *The Maritime Anthropologist* 1:2-5, 8.