

Specie Diversification-there's many a slip 'twixt successful fishing trials and commercial viability

By Ibrahim Athif Shakoor

17 March 2019

It must be acknowledged and congratulated. Finally, actual effort with visible results has been achieved towards specie diversification of the fishery industry. The Fishery Ministry has undertaken a 3-day fishing effort to locate and land Diamond Back Squids in the Maldivian Waters. Gear to catch the specie are to be distributed to interested fishers and another effort to distribute more gear has now been announced. The existence of Diamondback Squid in the Maldivian Waters is no longer stuff of myth and folklore. There's many a photo of the crew of the vessel with the monsters from the Deep. So, congratulations.

Specie diversification in the Fishery Industry has been an often-used, much abused, throw around term in the official lingo for some time now. Each successive government makes announcements of several effort towards specie diversification including mari-culture efforts. But none has, so far, come up with such evidently manifest results. This could perhaps be the next chapter in the diversification of the fishing industry since the late 1990's when the now popular yellow fin was introduced as a separate fishery, with good returns and excellent employment opportunities.



Diamond Back Squid Fishery in the Maldives

Specie Diversification has got to start somewhere, and large size Diamondback Squid is as, excellent a start as any. Yet, The Maldives is blessed with almost a million sq. km of marine wealth in our EEZ. And almost as an article of faith I believe that there's a lot more commercially viable resources out there. Let me outline a few that we know of.

1. Mahi-mahi or Fiyala. Prevalent throughout Maldivian Waters and often considered a nuisance by fishermen because of its association to skipjack schools. However, fiyala is a targeted fishery in many countries and exported in frozen container loads.
2. Mushimas and rimmas; a variety of sardine- stocks of which are spread throughout the Maldivian archipelago. They arrive unnoticed from deep sea and enter shallow lagoons or nearby waters. Each night they leave the lagoons and go we know not where. Only to reappear early next morning. We are familiar with it. Fish it, eat it and enjoy it. Yet, we have no idea whence it comes from and how to target volumes

3. Cuttlefish- Enters almost every harbor and lagoon. But we have no idea of the volumes and where the stock is located.
4. Bill-fish varieties like hibaru and kurumas. Is only of sporting interest to most Maldivians yet it's a targeted fishery in some countries and is slowly developing as a targeted fishery around Thulusdhoo and nearby islands. The length of the Maldivian Coast Line is twice that of Sri Lanka and there's no reason to conclude that bill fishes only prefer the coastal waters around the island of Thulusdhoo.
5. Deep sea crabs, lobsters and octopus. Evidently available as they have been caught, albeit not as a targeted activity, and sold in the local market. But we have no idea of the size of the stock, the depths at which they are located and the sustainable mass at which they could be fished.

There may, evidently, be other species that we are not aware of. Yet, the above are manifestly available in the Maldivian Waters. Whether they are available in commercial quantities need to be investigated even if it is for purely academic reasons.

Yet there's much road to travel and many storms to prevail upon, between successful sea trials and sustainable commercial viability of a new species. I was fortunate enough to witness, the slow and time-consuming development of mariculture activities for Snappers and Groupers in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. They were first tested in University laboratories using state funds. Two years later I also witnessed sea trials, still undertaken in cooperation with state companies. A year later, with proven success from the trials the activities went commercial.

By and large, private companies have this peculiar tendency to invest in activities that would assure net returns to their shareholders. Understandably they shy away from experimental effort. Some very large world class companies do undertake primary research and conduct experimental trials. But then, the product is copyright protected and enormous tax benefits accrue to those companies undertaking such original research.

Research into new species for new commercially viable species in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and even India were largely undertaken by Universities and Research Institutes with the assistance of State Funds. Out of many, many such efforts, it is only the successful ones that are sea trialed and then co-opted by the private sector.

The interest of the government to seek diversification in the fishery industry cannot be doubted today. We see the effort, we see the result in photos.

However, so far the policy has been to offer incentive and encouragement to private investors for them to undertake activities. The Sea Trials for Diamondback Squid have evidently gone further. For us, here in the Maldives, with the economy in the stage and the form it is now, perhaps it is now time for a shift in emphasis and consider direct government participation and involvement into specie diversification. Perhaps it is time to get the state company, Mifco, to be involved in diversification effort. It will not be a novel idea for Mifco. Several such trials in many species have been attempted in Mifco's different facilities in the past. Acting as mid-wife to the yellow fin industry that was introduced into the country in the 90's is perhaps the best known and most successful one.

However, the involvement of the state company must take place only as a mid-wife ready to step back when the baby is considered viable. Such involvement by an SOE should be with the stated understanding that they'll transfer technology and business to the private sector and move away into upstream areas and other new fishery development. For ultimately, if the specie proves to be commercially viable, private sector will enter, expand and do it better, cheaper and with greater profit. Such is the result of what happened in the Yellow Fin Industry in the Maldives and with many, many more businesses here in the Maldives and else where in the world.

Might we, therefore, humbly request the state to take an additional step. Get state actors like Mifco to participate in, and undertake at sea, commercial activities. As soon as commercial viability is tested, invite and encourage private parties to invest in, not that they'll wait for an invitations once commercial viability is even glimpsed.

Once Commercial Viability is assessed and result in diversification of the fishery industry and therefore the larger Economy, State Agencies, should be ready to transfer downstream technology, offer knowledge and experience and gracefully walk away. With a strut and a bow.