

Coral Crisis: No Coral Reefs = No Fish = No Income

With their missing limbs, some of the young men in the coastal communities on the islands of eastern Indonesia look more like casualties of war than fishermen. These men, many of them barely more than boys, are the ones who were too slow letting go of the homemade bombs that the locals drop into the water to catch fish.

Blast fishing—which involves throwing bombs into the water and literally exploding the fish to the surface—has been a popular practice in the region for many years. It allows fishermen to quickly catch a large number of fish, many of which are still intact enough to take to market.

Fishing is a vital source of income for the region's mostly poor inhabitants.

Bombs are usually bottles or coconut shells stuffed with fertilizer and a crude wick. When they blow up, these bombs create large craters in the sea floor and destroy coral reefs.

Since fish breed in the reefs, fewer coral reefs means less fish in the long run.

Pawan Patil, a senior economist with the World Bank, manages the world's largest coral reef rehabilitation project, the Coral Reef Rehabilitation and Management Program Phase II.

"Millions of poor people fish," he says. "That is why this project is so important because poor communities completely depend on small scale fisheries for their livelihoods."

Aware to Care

Raising public awareness of the consequences of blast fishing and other environmentally unsustainable practices is a crucial part of the project.

"Many people don't understand that the reefs and the fisheries are linked. They don't understand that the reefs are the spawning grounds for fish," says Patil. "We tell the communities that if there are no reefs, there are no fish."

The program first targeted primary and secondary school students, giving the schools glossy colored

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books that illustrate the important linkages between reefs and fish production.

“We believe young people are very important.” Lessons learned at school are passed to their parents and the young people represented the next generation of fishermen.

The next phase of the project seeks to broaden community awareness through campaigns on television, newspapers and radio as well as extensive community education. The strategy includes distributing televisions and DVD players to communities to ensure access to educational programs on the linkages between fisheries and reefs.

Local communities are involved in key decisions and have incentives to feel responsible for the fishery.

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