

How to achieve target fish catch increase

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Since rice and fish are staple food for Filipinos, it is important to understand how government should respond in order to reverse the trend of declining marine fish catch and meet the need of the present and future generations.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) attributes the 6.34-percent decline in fisheries production in 2016 to natural phenomena like hot weather conditions, coupled with rough seas and typhoons. But there is a more specific cause.

In a letter titled “A challenging task for Duterte” (Opinion, 6/17/16), I explained that the success of pelagic fisheries, which provide 70 percent of the total marine fish catch, depends on a delicate balance between the physical oceanographic factors (that trigger the occurrence of alternating El Niño and La Niña phenomena), on the one hand, and the effect of fishing on the standing stock biomass, on the other.

Relating fish catch data with the Oceanographic Nino Index (ONI), which records the monthly sea surface temperature in the Pacific Region, shows that:

1) in January and December 2012, sea surface temperature was negative 0.7 degree centigrade (weak La Niña) and negative 0.2 (neutral La Niña), respectively; while in January and December 2015, it was 0.6 (weak El Niño) and 2.3 (very strong El Niño), respectively. The change from La Niña in 2012 to El Niño in 2015 coincided with the decline in marine fish catch from 2.119 million metric tons to 2,094 mmt, respectively, or by 1.2 percent;

2) in 2016 ONI changed from 2.2 (very strong El Niño) in January to negative 0.7 (weak La Niña) in December; this coincided with the further decline in fish catch to 2.027 mmt tons or by 3.2 percent.

The above data imply that during El Niño in the second half of 2015, there were more blooms of plankton—the foundation of the marine food web—that could have sustained high fish stock biomass; but the standing stock biomass was already at lower level due to overfishing or “high-fishing effort.” Which we can see from the increase in the number of fishers (1.37 million in 2002 to 1.6 million in 2012), resulting in low fish reproduction and productivity. Hence, the decline in catch was inevitable.

Therefore, the 2017-2022 Philippine Development Plan (PDP) annual productivity-target increase of 2.5-percent in commercial fishing and 1-percent in municipal fishing is not realizable. However, the target increase in catch may be attained if fishery law enforcement and the protection and conservation of marine protected areas will be combined with a reduction in fishing effort. This can be done by putting a limit—through licensing and registration—on the number of commercial and municipal fishers allowed to fish.

President Duterte has shown political will in giving urban poor people free housing, and farmers the privilege to tap irrigation systems for free. Well, he is facing a great challenge: to provide fishers—those who will be displaced by the reduction in fishing effort—with projects that would

allow for income diversification and alternative livelihood. After all, fisherfolk have the highest poverty incidence at 39.2 percent; among the farmers, the poverty incidence is only 38.3 percent.

EDMUNDO ENDEREZ, eendez@gmail.com