

Philippines tries to bring back small fish key to rural diet

By Joeal Calupitan and Patrick Whittle
The Associated Press

TANAUAN, Leyte, The Philippines — The Philippines, a nation made up of thousands of islands, is home to about 1.6 million people who work in fisheries, and the majority of those fishers are small-scale harvesters who collectively catch almost half of the nation’s fish.

Years of market pressures, lack of fisheries management, and unchecked overfishing from larger commercial fishers have led to a decline in small fish such as sardines that rural coastal communities in the country of about 110 million people depend on. Data is not available on the state of many fish stocks, but the conservation group Oceana has said more than 75% of the nation’s fishing grounds are depleted.

The problem of overfishing is especially detrimental to the country’s poorest people, many of whom earn their livings by fishing, said Ruperto Aleroza, an anti-poverty activist who has spent decades harvesting small fish like sardines and round scad from the waters around the archipelago. The small fish are important to the diet in parts of the Philippines where other sources of protein are not available, he said. The fish are used in traditional dishes such as kinilaw, a raw fish dish similar to ceviche.

“We fisherfolk are the second to the poorest in our country” behind only farmers, Aleroza said.

The challenge overfishing poses to people who earn their living from the sea and who count on fish for protein in their diet is being experienced throughout the world. As overfishing is impacting kinilaw in the Philippines, it’s affecting traditional dishes and ways of life in places such as the



Bahamas, where scientists and government officials worry the commercial fishing of conch, a marine snail central to the diet and identity of the island nation, may soon no longer be feasible. And in Senegal, overfishing has largely wiped out white grouper, long the basis for the national dish of thieboudienne.

Aleroza blames years of poor fishing management and unsustainable fishing practices for taking away both a way of life and a key source of protein for some of this nation’s poorest people.

“It is threatening the local food source. We can’t feed our family. And it’s worsening poverty of artisanal fishers,” he

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT. A fisherman (not seen) in the top photo inspects fish caught using the beach seine method at the coastal waters of Tanauan, Leyte, the Philippines, in this October 26, 2022 file photo. In the bottom photo, fishermen pull their nets using the same method. Non-governmental organizations are working with the government to adopt science-based, sustainable fishing practices. (AP Photos/ Aaron Favila, File)

said. “The overfishing worsens economic depression among us.”

Recently, the country has begun to make strides in rebuilding fisheries with spawning closures, said Mudjekeewis Santos, a scientist with the Philippines Department of Agriculture’s National Fisheries Research and Development Institute.

“And the communities are happy that happened, because their catch increased,” he said. “Fish don’t care about jurisdiction, and they’re being decimated.”

But there is much work left to be done, Santos said.

Non-governmental organizations such as the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) are working with the Philippines government to adopt science-based, sustainable fishing practices, said Edwina Garchitorena, who leads those efforts for EDF in the country.

The problem goes beyond small fish. The loss of small, ocean-going fish such as anchovies is also devastating for larger fish, which eat the small fish, she said.

Garchitorena and others blamed the over-exploitation of larger fish species to meet international demand, which she said increased fishing pressure on the smaller fish stocks that live closer to the coast.

“We’ve systematically reduced every type of fish in the ocean,” she said.

Whittle reported from Portland, Maine. This story was supported by funding from the Walton Family Foundation. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

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- MAY 2**
Resource Center
9-11 a.m.
650 NW Irving St, Portland
River District Navigation Center
(for residents only)
11:15 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.
1111 NW Naito Pkwy, Portland
Jean’s Place
(for residents only)
1:30-3:30 p.m.
18 NE 11th Ave, Portland
- MAY 4**
Street Roots
9-10:30 a.m.
211 NW Davis St, Portland
Cultivate Initiatives
11-1 p.m.
660 SE 160th Ave, Portland
Nightstrike
7:30-9:30 p.m.
Under the Burnside Bridge
- MAY 8**
Clark Center
(for residents only)
9-11 a.m.
1437 SE MLK Blvd, Portland
Doreen’s Place
(for residents only)
12-2 p.m.
610 NW Broadway St, Portland

- MAY 9**
Cultivate Initiatives
11 a.m. to 2 p.m.
247 SE 82nd Ave, Portland
Union Gospel Mission
2-3 p.m.
3 NW 3rd Ave, Portland
- MAY 10**
Portland Rescue Mission
(for residents only)
10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
13207 NE Halsey St, Portland
The Rosewood Initiative
1-4 p.m.
14127 SE Stark St, Portland
- MAY 15**
Cultivate Initiatives
10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
4808 SE 92nd Ave, Portland
- MAY 18**
Street Roots
9-10:30 a.m.
211 NW Davis St, Portland
Cultivate Initiatives
11-2 p.m.
660 SE 160th Ave, Portland

