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Is the closed fishing season policy effective in curbing catch declines?

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ABSTRACT. The closed fishing season policy is annually imposed in Davao Gulf to allow the fish stocks to recover and address the declining fish catch. Whether the closed season is effective in reducing catch and effort however, is still not determined. An assessment on the closed fishing season included survey and focus groups in Governor Generoso, Lupon, Davao City, Sta. Maria, Don Marcelino and Malita, as well as catch assessments using datafrom Philippine Statistics Office (PhilStat), and GPS tracking of willing small-scale fishers. A survey and an in-depth interview were also conducted to determined impacts on the fisheries market chain. Results of the study show that multiple factors contributed to the successful implementation of the closed fishing season in the Davao Gulf. Catch data analyses show that small scale fish catches have increased (municipal fishers) compared to commercial fish catches. Together the results show that the closed fishing season was effective in curbing catch declines for the fisheries. Thus, continuing the implementation of the closed season will contribute to the sustainability of fish stocks in the Davao Gulf. However, providing support and temporary jobs to displaced commercial fishers are needed.

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INTRODUCTION

Resource depletion due to overfishing as well as degradation of the aquatic environment i.e. overfishing, bleaching of corals, removal of mangroves, siltation of seagrass beds, and water pollution from industrial, agricultural and domestic sources, are all realities in the Philippines. As a result, the government has implemented several interventions to address this decline in the fisheries and the long-term sustainability of the fishing industry. In order to be successful however, these interventions require close monitoring, coordination, partnerships, and raising community awareness. The seasonal fisheries closures [Joint Administrative Order series of 2014 (JAO-2014 s.2)] target commercial fishers but may also impact the livelihood of small-scale fishers. Seasonal closures intend to reduce fishing mortality, lower fishing effort and rebuild declining fish stocks (Figure 1). However, negative impacts were noted such as increased potential fisher conflict, loss of individual and societal welfare, uncertainty in the long-term (issues of stakeholder legitimacy). Other issues that need understanding include economic and societal impacts of the closure that trigger support from fishing communities and other stakeholders. The study conducted by the Fisheries Catch Assessment Project of DOSCST and funded by DOST-PCAARRD addresses the lack of assessment of the implementation of the closed fishing season policy in Davao Gulf so that implementers can clearly judge its impacts or benefits. The researchers determined the impacts of fisheries closures to both small-scale fishers and commercial fishers as well as to the fisheries market chain.

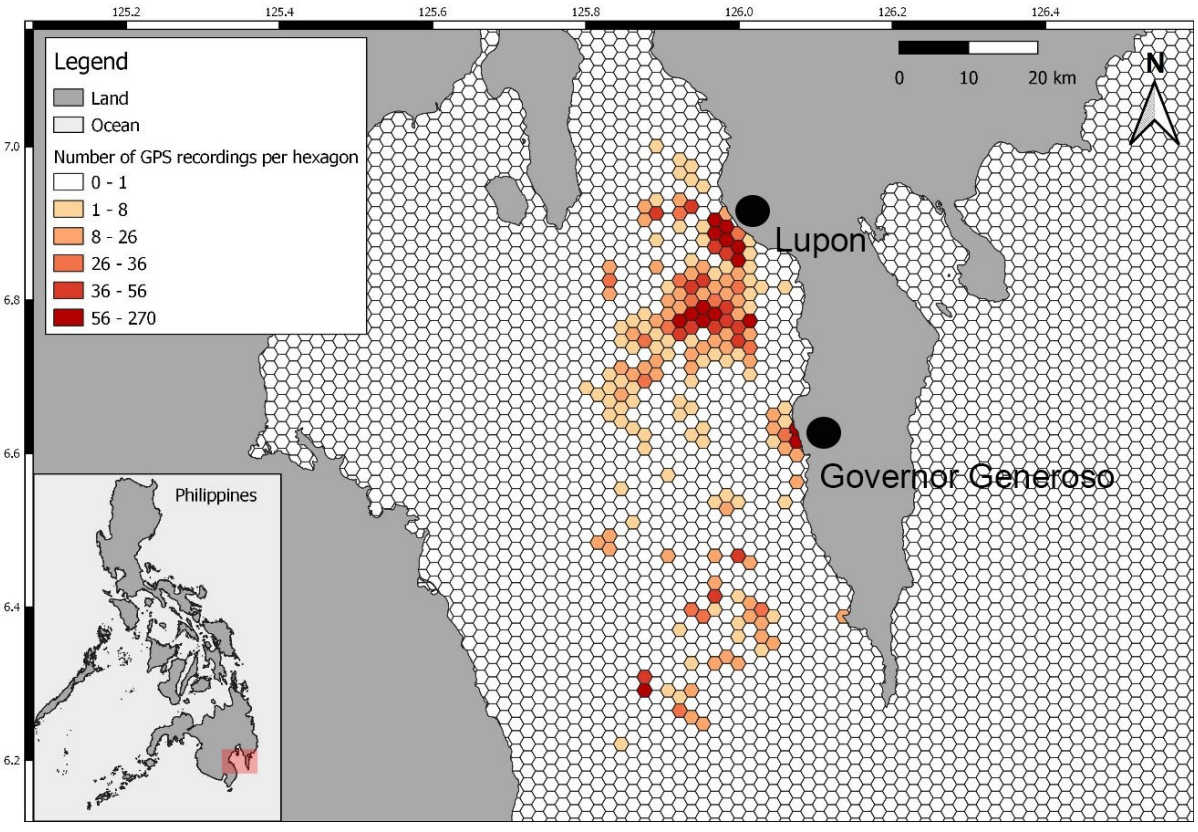

Figure 1. Fishing effort intensity of tracked fishers in Davao Gulf.

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APPROACH AND RESULTS

The assessment was done using surveys and focus groups in Governor Generoso, Lupon, Davao City, Sta. Maria, Don Marcelino and Malita (N=229) and catch assessments using data from Philippine Statistics Office (PhilStat) and GPS tracking of small-scale fishers (Figure 1). A separate assessment was conducted on its impact on the fisheries market chain using survey (N=150) and in-depth interview (N=80).

Results of the study have shown that multiple factors contributed to the implementation of the closed fishing season in the Davao Gulf. The analysis showed that the catch per unit effort (CPUE) was highly influenced by revenue and number of years of fishing experience. Catch data analyses have also shown higher fish catches (224 to 336 tons/year) among the small-scale fishers (municipal fishers), after the imposition of the closed fishing season and lower catches for the commercial fishers (238 to 92 tons/year) (Figure 2). Other influencing factors for support of the closed fishing season included the number of fishing hours, fish price, membership to community organizations, and awareness of policy among fishers.

In the major fisheries markets (Tagum, Panabo and Davao cities), 91% of vendors, traders, graders also supported the closed fishing season believing to help in the conservation of the fish species (49%) for the sake of their own children (Figure 3).

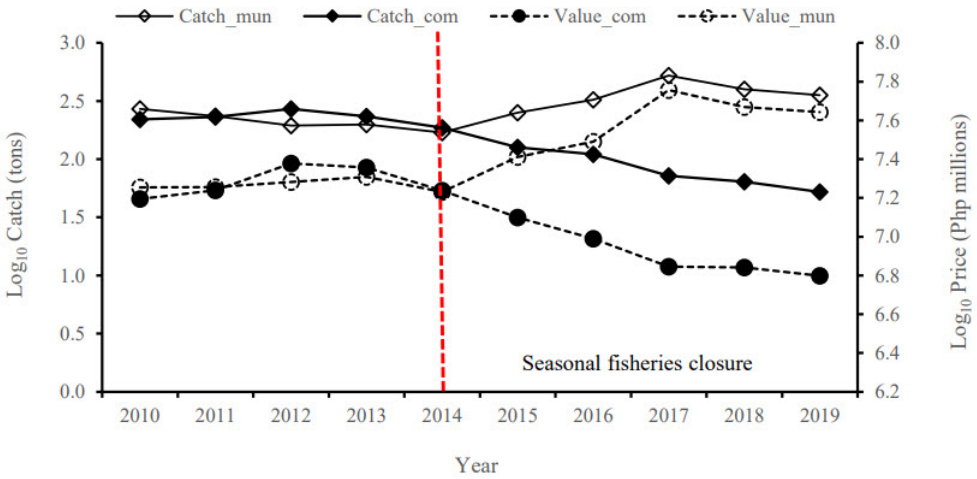

Figure 2. Fishing effort intensity of tracked fishers in Davao Gulf.

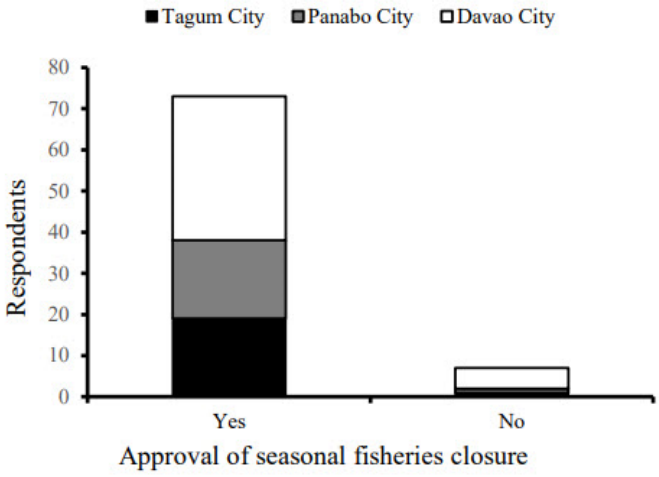

Figure 3. Approved of the close fishing season.

There was no perception of lack of fish supply during the imposition of the closed fishing season (76%). However, they agreed (72%) that if there was a short of supply of fish the price increases (Figure 4A). The impact of the closed fishing season in the market chain was negligible due to steady supply from nearby General Santos City and Zamboanga City (Figure 4B).

CONCLUSION

The results show that the implementation of the closed fishing season was effective in curbing catch declines for the small-scale fishers. While the findings are favorable to small-scale fishers, it is also true that some commercial fishers and their families suffer inadequate food and hunger during the closed fishing season. By providing them with adequate cash aid or cash for work program and temporary jobs until the open season, this will keep them from hunger, and open them to other livelihood opportunities.

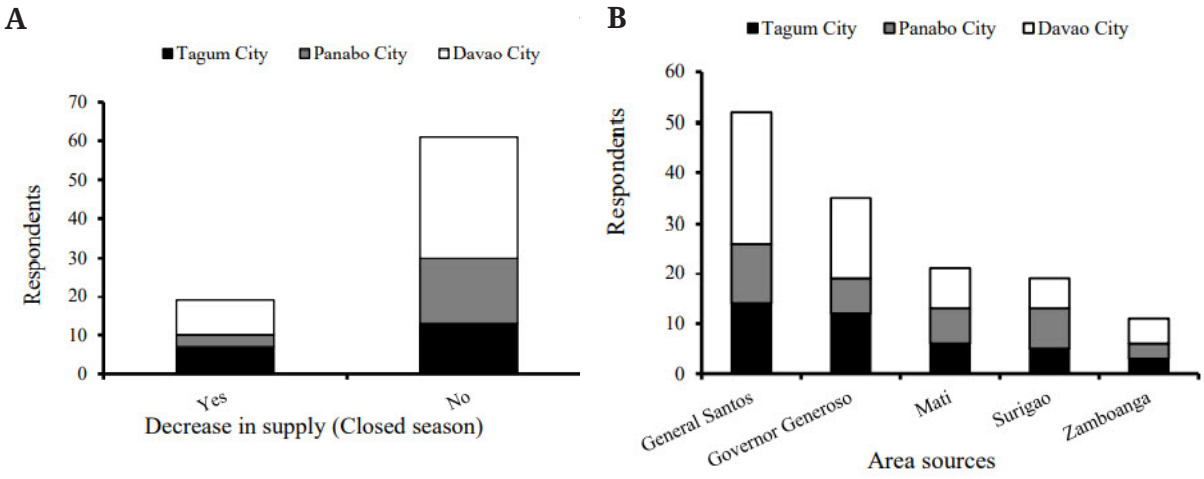

Figure 4. Experience of decrease in supply in the market during closed season (A) and other area sources of fish supply (B).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lack of continuity of fisheries management initiatives will only result lack of cooperation among fishers, and while there are debates surrounding the closure policy, we strongly suggest that the economic benefits to small-scale fishers and biological benefits to the commercial fish stocks favor keeping such policy in place.

In previous coastal resource management projects, long-term benefits may not continue after project termination due to lack of support by the community or the government. To augment the effort control program, diversified economic activities such as cash for work, other subsidy programs like 4Ps, especially those with monthly income below Php 8,000 and with children to fend will help alleviate their immediate needs during the closed fishing season. Training and organizing fishers for supplemental livelihood packages may help them to eventually shift their livelihoods towards land-based activities in the long-term.

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