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Recreational fishing lands new business opportunities

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The rise of tourism as a key industry in Taiwan is bringing new hope to the country's commercial fishing population, who are turning to recreational fishing for an economic turnaround.

Despite being blessed with some 1,600 kilometers of spectacular coastline and resource-rich waters, Taiwan only recently began to develop its sportfishing industry. "The country's commercial fisheries were very successful in the past. As a result, it never occurred to either the government or fishermen that they could turn their production facilities into tourism assets," said Ader Ho, secretary-general of the Taiwan Leisure Fishery Development Association.

Given the formerly tense relationship with mainland China, under martial law the government severely restricted marine activities, including sportfishing on the ocean, as they might have posed a threat to national security. "The beautiful coastlines of Taiwan were thus left largely unexplored," Ho said.

The generally low esteem of fishermen themselves and the lack of respect the public have for their work also make it difficult for the aging generation to think outside the box, according to Ho, who has been helping fishing communities around the island develop their local economy for several years.

"Fishing is a laborious and hazardous profession at the mercy of nature," Ho told "Taiwan Today" in an interview Dec. 30, 2009. The stereotype of the fishing population as being poorly educated, low-income earners was so deeply ingrained that many of the country's fishermen, including those who have successfully earned a decent living for their family, do not wish to see their children follow in their footsteps. "Most of the younger generation did not want to stay in their hometowns, because they saw no future there."

But in recent years the tide is starting to turn. As wild catches gradually decline due to overfishing, many fishermen are finding it increasingly difficult to make their ends meet, and a large number of Taiwan's 225 fishing ports are falling into disuse as well, forcing these people to seek new sources of income.

The public's new-found need for leisure activities and the timely government designation of tourism as an emerging industry opened a window of opportunity, as recreational fishing offers new hope to the country's fishing industry.

Ironically, the recent economic recession may have also contributed to the rise of the sector. "Whether by choice or not, some of the second generation are returning home from the cities. They are changing the appearance of their hometowns with their entrepreneurship."

"Given its unique nature, fishing is a business dependent on government subsidies. This is not really an

effective cure for the sector's present predicament," Ho said. Sportfishing, on the other hand, is proving to be a sustainable solution, because it can help local communities build a self-sufficient economy, he explained.

With a degree in applied economics from National Taiwan Ocean University, Ho and a group of co-workers founded the development association in 2007 to assist local fishing villages in venturing into this new business. "Our mission is to help create as many successful experiences as possible, so that they can serve as models for other aspiring fishermen," he explained.

The association serves as an intermediary between the government and locals. "We know what the people want and need, and by relaying their messages to the government, we can help allocate resources more effectively," he said. Since fishermen often lack the multiple business skills required to run a tourism operation, "we can offer consultation and support with our expertise in this regard."

Under the guidance of the association, some households have renovated their residences into homestays, complemented with local cuisine, while others have converted their fishing boats into tourist boats for whale watching or offshore fishing. "When I first told these people that they could make more money this way, they laughed in disbelief," Ho recalled.

But as Lin Chen-li, president of the island's leading whale-watching company Turumoan, discovered, not only can sportfishing be a profitable business, it also helps the public understand the importance of ecological preservation. While Turumoan is a for-profit organization, "the greatest satisfaction that I get out of running the business is that I am contributing to the sustainable employment of marine resources," noted Lin, who is also chairman of the Taiwan Leisure Fishery Development Association.

After promoting whale and dolphin watching for over a decade, Lin said that he is seeing increasing awareness of marine ecological preservation among the public as well as the fishing population. "They used to think that whales and dolphins were their enemies, but now they have learned to respect and protect these animals, because their presence indicates an abundant fish population in the nearby waters."



Leisure fishery offers great lessons on marine ecology and conservation, such as the release of endangered horseshoe crabs back to the wild. (CNA)

The island has much to offer to those interested in exploring its surrounding waters and learning about the fisheries profession, Ho pointed out. A typical package tour includes accommodation at local homestays operated by fishermen and participation in their daily routines, such as working at oyster farms or digging for clams on sand beaches. “By experiencing a fisherman’s life, people learn to show appreciation for the seafood they consume, and thus greater respect for fishing as a profession.”

Through the process of demonstrating their skills and sharing their stories, fishermen will regain a sense of pride in what they do for a living. “To them, the recognition and rebuilt self-esteem are equally important as the extra earnings,” Ho said. And as long as visitors keep coming, local merchants will have income and survive. “These jobs will be there to stay, and the local economy will revive.”

This sector is definitely worth promoting to ethnic Chinese tourists from around the world, Ho pointed out. In addition to its fine food, Taiwan’s advantage as a tourist destination lies in the vitality and hospitality of its people, especially at the grassroots level. “Package tours with a theme around agriculture and fisheries are especially appealing to visitors from Hong Kong and Singapore, who share our cultural heritage.”

Ho acknowledged that many challenges still lie ahead. “We still have a long way to go, but we are heading in the right direction,” he said. (THN)