



The Fisherman & his Wife

A true story from Serangan, Bali

Although we may be interested in where the fishes and corals for the reef hobby come from, we rarely give any thought to how they are collected, and probably never wonder about the people who collect them. On a recent trip to Bali, Frank Schmidt (ESAIA e.V.) interviewed a typical fisherman to find out about his life and his work. (T.Hayes)

Fisherman Made Sudira (39), his wife Wayan and their two kids – schoolboy Kadek Resa and the little girl of four years, Putu Krisna- were all born and still live in Serangan, Bali. The village is located on a small island, now peninsula, close to Sanur in the South of Bali. The former mangrove area and rather isolated place has rapidly developed over the past 12 years since BR Pontok Serangan was connected by a bridge to the main island of Bali. A marina was built and expatriates started to settle here, escaping the increasingly touristy areas along the south coast of Bali. Still local village life goes on as before.

Made's family is one of the poorest in the village, but at least has a roof over its head. A hut with two small rooms, beds, plywood cupboards, two fans, a small TV and a minimalist kitchenette. I see neither washing facilities nor a toilet.

I'm asking Made, **“Why do you believe to be among the poorest in your village?”**

Made, *“Because I don't own a Moped, or even a small boat.”*

“What is your daily average income?”

Made, *“15.000 Rupiah (1.20 €), when I go out fishing.”*

“What does 'go out fishing' mean?”

Made, *“I wade and swim the 1 km out to the reef, around the platform over there, and collect fish for a middleman in my village. If I had a moped, I could bring the fish directly to Jimberan, where I would earn more.”*

“Why Jimbaran?”

Made, “In Jimbaran is the export facility. The exporter is a wealthy man, even richer than the middleman in my village.”



I visit the middleman after my conversation with Made. He buys fish, invertebrates and live rock from the local fishermen and forwards them to the exporter in Jimbaran exclusively. Fishermen with a moped get a better price for their fish than collectors without any transport (collectors like Made just catch anything what they come across for 15.000 Rupiah a day) as they have the opportunity to bring their catch directly to the exporter in Jimbaran where they earn more, especially for rare or ordered fish. For some species they can earn 15.000 Rupiah per fish.¹



The middleman facility is made of three concrete tanks with approx. 600 l of saltwater in the garage of the house. The water is circulated by pumps and aerators, but that is all there is in the way of equipment. Fish are kept here up to a week until supply is sufficient to invest in the fuel to transport the organisms to the exporter. For the rather short transport of thirty minutes the fish are gun packed in plastic bags with seawater and oxygen.

Upon my departure, a collector shuffles in, with two plastic buckets full of fish (small box and cowfish, damsels and clownfish, sea stars and urchins). He just arrived with his boat, coming from the opposite side of the island, where it has coral and sea weed farms. I ask him if he is alone. No, other collectors have just arrived and are still unloading their boats. Five small bangkas, the traditional outrigger boats, loaded with live rock and a potpourri of marine organisms. The fish are separated with bare hands into the buckets and carried across the street to the middleman. Dead or injured fish are thrown overboard. *Life is hard.*

“Made, you alone sustain the livelihood of your family. What happens when you fall sick?”

Made, “I need to approach my relatives for money then”.

“Do you have any other income source?”

Made, “No. There is nothing else to make a living of.”



¹ I know of fishermen in Banggai, small islands East of central Sulawesi, who used to earn 380 Rupiah (0.03 €) per Banggai Cardinal. Now, since they formed a cooperative and follow their own code of conduct, which forbids cyanide use, they receive 450 Rupiah (0.04 €) per fish. The local government set quota to manage the fishery. (Source: LINI)



Collection Gear
©F. Schmidt

“You supply exclusively the middleman in your village. Does he provide any equipment, like goggles, fins or transport bags?”

Made, “No! That's my responsibility. Would you like to see my gear?”

He presents age-old goggles, thought for kids and a shabby snorkel. Even dodgier are his fins – self-made of old tyre tubing. I would probably be worse off with than diving without them... He shows me what the collectors in the Philippines call a 'fast ferry' – his floating transport devise. An air filled tube with a spaghetti strainer in its middle. It serves as float for Made when swimming out to the reef, where he ties it to his foot to dive the 4-6m when collecting fish. Any fish caught is transferred to the spaghetti strainer on the surface. Made is seesawing between the waves like a cork until the strainer is filled with fish and he swims back to shore.



Fish & Live Rock Landing
©F. Schmidt

“What gear do you use?”

Made, “A scoop net. It is difficult to reach them as they hide between the corals and rocks. Then I use a long hook to flush them.”

“Have you ever used potass (cyanide)?”

Made wants to now why I'm asking. I explain to him that it is a well-known secret of the trade in Indonesia or the Philippines.

Made, “Law prohibits Cyanide use. If one gets caught by a patrol a pack of trouble is waiting.”



Catch of the Day
©F. Schmidt

“Have you ever been caught?”

But its not that easy to dupe Made. He only knows of the consequences from others, although he claims not to know anybody who has ever been stopped by a patrol. I can feel it is not the whole story, but digging deeper seems pointless. **I rather explore if Made is using a compressor or if he ever went deeper than 6 meters.**

Made, “No, I wouldn't dive deeper. On rare occasions I dive beyond the reef crest, because the more valuable species tend to be there, but it is dangerous to swim there. When I surface and blood is running out of my ears, I know I went too deep. All my friends are familiar with this phenomenon. But it can be worse, especially when using a compressor and getting numb from the emissions of the engine you take in over the tubing. Every year collectors die or get paralysed from decompression sickness. Some were my friends.”

I try to explain about dive safety and decompression. Made just gives a shrug.

Made, “I know that diving is risky, but it is the only livelihood for me. I have to sustain my family, pay for school, food and the doctor.”

Living costs in Bali are rising. Massive developments, in infrastructure and communications have taken place. The by-pass Jalan Ngurah Rai, kind of a motorway connecting Kuta with Sanur, is better than many of Germany's autobahns. Trendy shops and restaurants with European cuisine spring up like mushrooms. That all comes with a price. A beer is more expensive than in my hometown now. I remember that the first mall just opened when I came to Bali for the first time in 2002. No idea how many of them are there now... One sees Porsches and other shiny cars in the parking lots. **I ask Made how much a kilogram of rice is now.**

Made, "Ah, the price goes up every year. Not long ago I paid Rph 5000, now it's Rph 7000 already".

"And how much do you pay for school?"

Made, "Around 1 Million Rupiah. Probably I cannot afford to pay for my daughter too. But my wife didn't go to school either."

"Is there a doctor in Serangan and how much is a consultation?"

Made, "Yes, there is. He charges 15.000 Rupiah."



I spot his little daughter lying on the bed. It is hot like in a sauna – why does the fan not work? Power cut. The little girl sleeps like a log, but breathes heavily. Later, upon saying goodbye, she sits on her mother's lap and coughs terribly. **I ask if they went to the doctors already.**

Wayan, "No, we needed to save the money for the cough syrup. I think she's getting better now. She had high fever some days ago. Should be ok now."

Words fail me. How could it be worse than now? Neither Made nor Wayan expect any sympathy. They are happy to have an expatriate visitor. It will get around and maybe improve their social rank in the village.

"How much does Putu weigh?"

Wayan, "I'm not sure ..."

She tells a figure – half of what my own daughter of similar age weighs. I can't believe what I'm hearing. I feel suddenly totally dried out and ask Made for some water (regardless of Bali-belly, I'll take what he offers).



Finally I raise a question, which many might find naïve or inappropriate. I ask nevertheless.

"Made, are you happy?"

He doesn't understand and asks what I mean. I explain that I want to know if he is content with his life in general, although there is always something bothering... Made laughs.

"Nobody ever asked me that and frankly, I've never thought about it. Maybe that means I'm happy. If I would be unhappy, I would probably waste my time with drinking and thinking. Well, I guess, I'm happy. You know why? Because I have a family and friends like you!"

I'm moved and would like to show my appreciation of his kindness. Nothing else is expected. Easiest would be to put some money on the table, but I like trying a different way...

I say: Probably you are wondering why I ask all these questions. You know, I'm not only interested in this little colourful fishes. We Europeans are just crazy about a piece of intact coral reef. However, I want to learn more about those people, who collect these fishes for us and find out how they live. Thus I'm grateful for your willingness to listen to and answer my questions. Now I need something real, I can take with me to show my friends how you work and what gears you use. Would you give me your fins, hook and the fast ferry?

Made, "If you think? But I cannot collect then anymore."

"I'm happy to compensate you financially!" I reply.

Probably he will craft his fins again from old tyre tubing and use the money for other things. I don't mind. I hand over the agreed amount. Much to much, but I want to help... While he wraps up the gear, I tell him how they catch mandarins in Batasan. Made cannot believe they spear them with self-made harpoons and the fish survives in good shape. I explain that dragonets have a very protective mucus layer, which helps them to heal wounds quickly. Its all Greek to Made... he just asks himself where all the fishes he and his friends catch year after year, end up. Demand is constantly rising. Does everybody in Germany have an aquarium by now? Or do they eat them in the end?

