

TAGAL: AN ANGLER'S VIEW

By Aznir Malek

I have seen a river teeming with fish. I have seen lubuks with hundreds of kelah. I have seen a friend catch more than forty of those kelah, on fly, in two days of fishing. I have seen what can be done when we give a village the power to manage its own river. I have thus seen the future of Malaysian kelah fishing.

I feel a bout of shame; that Malaysians in the Peninsula are still grappling with the issue the pillage and destruction of our riverine fish, with no realistic solutions at hand. It takes the villagers of Babagon, Sabah, to provide us an answer.

The word is “tagal”, Kadazandusun for ‘prohibition’. No, not the American liquor variety, but a simple system of community-based river management where a village reinforces the controls on fishing (read poaching) on its stretch of river.

One big lesson here is, when you leave a river to its own devices, the fishes will come back, and in numbers too.

This lesson was learned in Denmark, several years ago. The Danish Fishing Association, in collaboration with their government, implemented projects to improve the state of their rivers.

Over centuries, the Danes have straightened their rivers. They get clogged up with vegetation. The flow of water died, and the fishes disappeared. Now, they have re-created bends and riffles and rocky rapids. They then learned to their joy that, even without re-stocking, the trout, sea trout and salmon came back!

The same wondrous result happened in Babagon. They didn't restock their lubuks, and yet saw fish re-appearing in numbers after only six months into the tagal project. Then the Sabah Fisheries folks came to help in the form of fish-feeding with pellets.

Things are very healthy, right now. In certain stretches of the river, the village conduct their occasional fish-catching, and the spoils are shared among the participants. There are also certain zones that are gazetted as ‘off-limits’. These serve as capacitor banks: generators of fish stocks.

One more phenomenon is worthy of mention. The fishes in the non-tagal zones have migrated into the tagal ones. They seem to know that they are safer there!

The biggest learning I made is that tagal is a win-win-win situation.

The village wins because they are in control of their river. They get to see fish again, and catch them once in a while. And when they start the sportfishing program (based on Catch-And-Release), they will get significant income and employment for their kin. A visiting angler will spend good money on fishing and guiding fees, food, accommodation and sundry items. The village can provide this for fair margins.

The local government wins too. They don't need to spend much in making tagal work; there's no

need for river policemen! A tagal village will have heightened sense of harmony and responsibility (less headaches!). Sportfishing activity will also bring in eco-tourism dollars, for they are partners with the village.

Lastly, we anglers win. We get to taste kelah fishing without the pain of extreme jungle travel and the severe logistics it entails. It's a case of kelah fishing for the masses. The future of freshwater fishing is thus in good hands!

Of course, these things don't just happen. The way I see it, there are a few secrets to the success of tagal.

Firstly, the village needs to have the right leadership; a committee that is committed (that's what a committee should be!) to the cause. In Babagon, if they have an unresolved issue regarding a poaching case, they have no qualms bringing it to the Minister!

Secondly, the government has to be supportive. The village needs knowledge on the fishes and their management eg. zoning system for the river stretches. The government also serves as the arbitrator in any case of conflict. Some fiscal help in the form of fishfeed would also do no harm.

And then there is also the need for knowledge and methodology, to make sportfishing a success. This is where fishing associations and individual anglers can come in to help.

There is one more question that needs answering: how do we transfer the tagal concept to the Peninsula?

For sure, it needs the combined hearts and minds of people in the government, the fishing associations, and anglers like you and me. We can't wait for another Vitalis to come forth while the kelah of our rivers get ever closer to extinction, do we?

I know there are pessimists out there who are forever saying it can't be done. But Babagon and the other twenty villages in Sabah have shown that it can.

Let's do it!