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New technology directs fishermen towards catch

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Mumbai: Scientists in a quiet neighbourhood in Versova are testing the waters to see if Mumbai can be turned into a Gold Coast of sorts. Every morning, they try to map out areas in the sea where fishermen might find more schools of fish that day.

Along the coastline of Maharashtra, as kolis assemble at the jetty before embarking on a fishing trip, they gravitate towards the community notice board for updates. Advance storm warnings are welcome during the monsoon, but on a routine basis, they are keener to know which direction to head in to net a bigger catch.

The scientists who are conducting these trials claim that fishermen who use this facility net double the volume of fish than they did before. And by directing them, the experts help save precious diesel that is subsidized by the government.

Dr Veerendra Veer Singh, principal scientist at the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) at Versova, was selected to helm this World Bank pilot project that is being undertaken jointly by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS), Hyderabad, and a private service provider in Mumbai.

“Daily updates disseminated by us are recieved through GPS technology adapted to mobile phones,” Singh says. “We have distributed mobile phones in 13 villages along the coast of Maharashtra, particularly in Raigad district. Each day, we gather data and satellite images from INCOIS to prepare a forecast for early warning of storms and weather data. We can also map out locations where fish may be available by assessing water surface temperature, wind velocity and chlorophyll, which indicates fish food.”

These special mobile phones have been given to village heads who relay information to the community. Together with community level coordinators, who have been trained to decode the diagrams and graphs, they update the notice board each morning. Around 1,900 fishermen in Maharashtra are said to utilize the benefits of this innovation, particularly in the eco-sensitive Raigad, where load-shedding hampers reception of weather advisories through television, facsimile or digital boards.

The grant-in-aid project was started in April 2010 under the World Bank Global Environment Facility (GEF) Project. Singh had been working in the field of climate change for the past few years and was the natural choice to head this venture. “This effort is designed to mitigate perceived future climatic risks,” he says. “We have identified 75 fishing villages in the state whose fish-drying platforms, auction zones or net-mending areas that are on the beach could be inundated by a 1m rise in the sea level in around 10 to 30 years if the glaciers continue to melt.”