HYDROCARBON EXPLORATION IN SRI LANKA: INTERVENTION TO MITIGATE IMPACTS ON FISHERIES INDUSTRY

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The fisheries industry plays an important role in the economy of Sri Lanka by providing direct and indirect employment opportunities for 560,000 and livelihood for 2.6 million people, Generation of income, foreign exchange earnings and provision of reasonably priced protein for the rural and urban masses in the country are other main benefits. This sector contributes around 1.8% to the GDP and serves as the cheapest source of animal protein, Fish and fishery products fulfill 53% of the protein requirement of the people. Daily per capita fish consumption of the country has achieved about 44.6g (16.3 kg/ year) which is expected to be increased up to 60g/day (22kg/ year) to fulfill the recommendations of the Medical Research Institute of Sri Lanka. The greatest portion of the total fish production comes from the marine sector which contributes more than 87%. Off shore fishery contributes 35% whereas coastal fishery contributes 52%. Government of Sri Lanka has identified commercially exploitable oil and gas reserves in the Cauvery and Mannar basin areas within the territory in Sri Lanka.

The aim of this study is to assess the present status of fisheries and potential impacts of oil exploration activities on the fishery resource with the view of identifying possible interventions to minimize adverse impacts. The present study was based on available information literature surveys and personal interviews.

The Cauvery is divided into five exploration blocks and Mannar basin is divided into nine exploration blocks by the government of Sri Lanka. Exploration activities such as seismic exploration, well drilling, and structural emplacement directly interfere with the fishery resources as well as fishing communities. Exploration activities can restrict the available areas for fishing, obstruct navigational paths of the fishing vessels and obstruct fish migration. Disturbance to fish breeding grounds due to sound waves are evident. Leakages from drilling equipment, ballast water discharges from dredging vessels, accidental oil spills, oil leakages from the ships, sewage and bilge water can lead to the chemical pollution of the marine environment and creating to health hazards to both fishery community and fishes.

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To mitigate the socio- economic impacts and environmental problems due to oil exploration including, drilling of oil wells, structural emplacement, decommissioning or well abandonment, reduction in fishery resources, restrictions in fishing, fishers are to be compensated. In addition, a strict compliance to environmental regulations and continuous monitoring of fishing activities and fishery resources are suggested.

Key words: *Hydrocarbon exploration, Fishery resource, Environmental impacts, Cauvery basin, Mannar basin*