



Rapurapu Island: WHERE YOU EAT FISH AT YOUR OWN RISK



Photo by PEPITO D. FRIAS

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FILIPINOS ARE fond of eating fish. It is not a discovered or a chanced lifestyle. It is a heritage, a natural consequence of the country's archipelagic setting. So when people travel to the provinces, especially to fishing villages, they always expect to eat fresh catch of fish.

But not so when I and my officemate took a three-hour banca ride towards Rapurapu town at the edge of the Pacific in the south-eastern part of Albay. We were there to verify and document alleged fish poisoning in this island.

Rapurapu is an island community off the coast of Albay. The island acts like a buffer and protects the shores of Albay from giant waves coming from the Pacific. Mangroves line the shores of the island; above the town looms a

mountainous forested area.

Rapurapu is a typical fishing village. So I took it for granted that my stay in the island would naturally include at least a meal consisting of fresh fish.

On our first meal, volunteers from the Social Action Center (SAC) of the Municipal Parish of Rapurapu, which hosted our two-day visit, offered us dinner without fish. I still thought that maybe later I could taste some broiled catches. After all, the island is located in what I supposed is one of the best

fishing grounds in the entire archipelago. Yet, after a two day-stay, I and my companions had never had the chance to eat a single fish.

Fr. Felino Bagausan, Rapurapu parish priest, said that the people of the Poblacion of Rapurapu have stopped eating fish that are caught from Albay Bay after two incidents of fish kill occurred last October 11 and October 21, 2005. He said that these two incidents were caused by mine-waste spills coming from a mining firm that operates in the island, the Lafayette Mining Company¹. These spills, he said, contained cyanide which he said had caused the fish kill. Fr. Bagausan recounted that some residents of a barangay that was affected by the spill brought him plenty of dead fish. He said



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that the people brought only those that they could carry with them. Since then, residents have stopped eating fish caught within their shores for fear of being poisoned, Bagausan said.

News of the mine waste spills and its dangerous effects on the health of the people had sown fear among the residents of Rapurapu and some neighboring towns of Sorsogon. In Legaspi City, traders no longer patronize fish catch coming from Rapurapu Bay. Legaspi is the nearest unloading port where most of the fish from Rapurapu are sold wholesale.

In an island where the majority of the population



Photo by TRACY P. PABICO



Plunder and protest in Rapu-rapu: open-pit mining on a small island (above); citizens protest against the destruction of their habitat, livelihood and main food source.

Photo by PEPITO D. FRIAS

depend on subsistence fishing and fishery-related activities for income and food, the contamination of its surrounding waters cannot be taken too lightly. The loss of the only source of livelihood and food-source will seriously affect the very survival of thousands of island residents, not to mention the health risks on the population in the surrounding municipalities.

But not all residents of the Poblacion of Rapurapu shy away from fish. A woman resident admitted that they still buy fish because she believes the bay may not be contaminated at all because the sea under-current is heading towards another direction, thereby carrying away the poisonous wastes. Or so she hopes. She had no hard data to support her belief, of course.

When I talked to her, she had just bought fish from a fish vendor who in turn showed me a plastic basin of her merchandise. There were about 2-5 kilos of fish of different varieties. "*Naibebenta mo pa rin ba yan dito?* (So you can still sell these here?)" I asked the fish vendor. "*Oo naman* (Yes, of



Photo by TRACY P. PABICO

course)," she said. The vendor goes around on a pedicab, pedalling around town while hawking fish. She told me that the fish are caught not inside the Bay but in fishing grounds some kilometers away. It seemed to be an honest sales-talk. I almost drew out my money to buy a few kilos; but I never dared.

This particular vendor has resorted to ingenious means to earn a few pesos out of selling fish, at a time when fish almost seemed synonymous with poison. She was not only selling her fish the old way. Whenever she ends up with unsold fish, she would dispose of this through a lottery. She might



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have 3 kilos of fish left, worth at least P150. She would sell 20 different numbers at P10 per number. Like any other game of chance, the holder of the winning number ends up with the catch, paying only P10 for the entire haul.



Photo by TRACY P. PABICO

But then, whether the fish was safe to eat was also left to chance. It was, I thought, a game of chance where no one is really lucky and no one really wins.

I saw again the fish vendor who pedaled past me towards the port of Rapurapu. There was the empty basin and the scale jangling away on her pedicab. She beamed at me, and I presumed she had just raffled off all of her supply. "Some unlucky people had just lost," I thought.

Until that day when we left for home, I and my group were not able to eat fresh fish on the island.

When we headed for Legaspi aboard a large passenger banca, two baggage-carriers brought down a crate of fish on the side wing of the banca. I could picture the owner of this crate bargaining with and imploring fishbuyers in Legaspi City. It was a lone crate with several large fish inside, presumably caught from the Pacific side of Rapurapu. I took a picture of the yellowish tails that protruded from the crate.

The photos would not only be part of my documentation. They would remind me that a foreign-owned mining company, in its quest for gold, has robbed the residents of Rapurapu Island the right to harvest the seas' bounties.

NOTE:

¹ According to the Mines and Geosciences Bureau website, The Rapu Rapu Polymetallic Project is a mining venture of Lafayette Phils., Inc (an Australian firm). The project will extract copper, gold, silver and zinc from the island.