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John G. Butcher, *The closing of the frontier; A history of the maritime fisheries of Southeast Asia c. 1850-2000*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004, xxi + 442 pp. ISBN 9067182451. Price: EUR 30.00 (paperback).

PETER BOOMGAARD

Any idea where the tuna on your sandwich and the shrimp in your salad come from? There is a fair chance that they were caught or cultivated in Southeast Asian waters. And did you eat as much tuna and shrimp 25 years ago as you do now? You almost certainly did not.

This type of information is to be found in John Butcher's *The closing of the frontier*, a book that deals with the maritime fisheries of Southeast Asia between 1850 and 2000. Butcher's book is one of the latest volumes to appear in the series *A Modern Economic History of Southeast Asia*. It is the first book on its topic, and a very welcome addition to our knowledge of Southeast Asian economic history, particularly because there were no recent overviews of the history of fisheries of any country in the region for the entire period under consideration.

The book consists mainly of seven chapters, together covering under 300 pages, in the eyes of this reviewer the ideal size for a textbook-like publication such as this one (the remaining part of the book is mainly taken up by almost 80 pages of notes and 40 pages of bibliography). After the introduction, Chapter 2 sketches the situation around 1850, while a short Chapter 3 presents a number of political, technological, and economic developments that form the backdrop against which changes in the fisheries of the region during the period 1870-1940 should be seen. Chapter 4 deals with the growing volume of catches using unchanged technology between the 1870s and the 1930s, while Chapter 5 describes technological change and the extension of the frontier of fisheries from the 1890s to the 1930s. In Chapter 6, entitled 'The Great Fish Race', Butcher describes and analyses the enormous expansion of the Southeast Asian fisheries from the 1950s or 1960s to around 1980, while Chapter 7 deals with 'The closing of the frontier', a phrase referring both to the depletion of maritime stocks, and to the fact that nation-states in the region increasingly claimed and policed large sections of what had once been international waters.

Butcher's study pays attention to the various factors that influenced the many changes to be observed in Southeast Asian fisheries during the last century and a half. Originally, population growth, accelerating first slowly but from the 1950s ever more rapidly until it began to level off very recently, was an important driving force behind the expansion of the sector in absolute terms. But international market forces played a role as well, and had done so for a long time, as witness the centuries-old search for pearls, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, and tripang (sea cucumber). Fisheries policies, as designed by the colonial states in the region from the 1920s onward, and later by the independent states, were also instrumental in shaping these changes. Governments were well aware of the enormous importance of fish to the diet of the people, particularly the less well-to-do, and they therefore stimulated the expansion of fisheries, partly by means of credit schemes, partly by attempting to disseminate new technology, and partly through subsidies and protective measures. The book also deals with the role of technological change. In addition to the shift from sail to steam, and at a later stage to the internal combustion engine, the reader is informed about the intricacies of fishing gear and the changes it underwent. Another technological factor is the role of refrigeration, which shifted the emphasis from salted to fresh fish. One of the latest developments in this respect is the shift to live fish, which has been made possible by the high speed of the vessels used. New technologies were often pioneered by foreigners, who invested in the fisheries of the region or who came to the region in large numbers in their own vessels, as did the Japanese. Last but not least, changes in demand in the various countries importing fish and other products of the sea are also dealt with.

Butcher shows how the interplay of these various factors had enormous environmental consequences. During the twentieth century, with increasing competition in coastal waters and with growing use of trawlers, there was an almost continuous shift in target species from demersal to pelagic fish – that is, from fish living on the bottom of the sea near the shores to fish living and feeding in the open sea, whether at the surface or at middle depths. This led not only to the physical displacement of fishing activities, but also to species that had been caught and eaten for centuries being replaced by new types that had hardly been exploited before. At the same time, the fact that some maritime animals were caught in large numbers led to the proliferation of others that were now no longer preyed upon to the same extent or had much more food at their disposal. Examples are shrimp, squid, and jellyfish. It goes without saying, alas, that the most important environmental effect is that many maritime species are no longer present in large numbers, and that some may not recover from long-term overfishing.

The closing of the frontier is in many ways an admirable study. Although the untutored reader may occasionally find the technical details regarding

the various changes in fishing gear somewhat taxing, the book is well written, and one cannot blame the author for the unfamiliar terminology that has to be used from time to time (the book contains a glossary). On one point I would actually have welcomed some more 'technical' information – the author mentions competition between petrol engines and diesel or semi-diesel engines, but hardly elaborates on the topic. Nor does he thematize the difference between a direct shift from sail to diesel or petrol engines on the one hand, and the shift from sail to steam and then to the internal combustion engine on the other. My main complaint, however, is that the book does not have a real concluding chapter in which the writer draws all the threads together, something he could easily have done. As things stand, he leaves the reader to digest the enormous amount of information unaided. However, in the light of what is on offer, this is a minor point that should keep no one from reading this more than welcome publication.
