4. The ‘Poor Moral Fisher’: Local Conceptions of Environmental Degradation, Fishing and Poverty in Esperanza

*Kawawa kami ang mga maliliit* [Small people like us are pitiful] (Armando, a live grouper fisherman).

My style of fishing has no impact on the environment at all because it is legal. It is only the illegal types of fishing that damage the environment for everyone else. I use old techniques—hook-and-line—this is only enough just to survive (Geronimo, a commercial fusilier fisherman).

This second quote from Geronimo exemplifies two central features of local understandings about fishing and environmental degradation in Esperanza that were widely expressed. Firstly, so-called ‘illegal fishing’ is understood to be the prime factor behind environmental degradation; ‘legal fishing’ does not damage the environment or impact upon fish stocks. Secondly, these legal techniques only produce enough ‘just to survive’; legal fishing is closely tied to poverty. Based on these two features, it follows therefore that any regulation of fishing practices should concentrate on regulating those who are doing the damage to the environment, and those who can afford to be regulated.

This chapter will explore in detail such local ideas that fishers express about fishing. It will fuse two ethnographic themes: one is their representation of the causes of environmental degradation; the other is their representation of their own fishing practices as moral, humble and tied to poverty. These two ideas are brought together in what I call the discourse of the poor moral fisher. Linking analyses of local representations of the environment, morality, fishing and poverty, I will argue that this discourse constitutes a particular understanding of the relationship between poverty and the environment. In Esperanza, poverty, a lack of impact on the environment, and morality are seen as mutually reinforcing; conversely, wealth, environmental degradation and immorality are understood as related in the same way (as illustrated in Figure 4-1).
Figure 4-1: The discourse of the poor moral fisher.

Linking Environmental Degradation, Fishing, Morality and Poverty

Politicised Environmental Knowledge

After situating my analysis in a discussion of various sets of literature, the second section of the chapter details the understanding of many fishers that the state of their marine environment is degraded. I examine the causes fishers ascribe to this degradation, emphasising their strong distinctions between legal and illegal modes of fishing. I demonstrate how such attributions are closely connected to deeply-held views about morality and legality in the Philippines.

This part of the chapter draws upon the work of writers such as Filer (2009) and Brosius (2006), who emphasise how we should consider local environmental knowledge as a form of political knowledge. Arguing with regard to the Penan of Malaysia, Brosius contends that ‘[w]hat matters is not how much Penan know about the landscape they inhabit, but how they position that knowledge, and themselves, within the broader contours of power’ (ibid.: 136). In Esperanza, local knowledge about the marine environment is more complex than simply environmental knowledge. It cannot be divorced from the political and moral claims in which it is embedded. Here, local knowledge of ecology and the marine environment is closely intertwined with particular social claims.

Elsewhere in Palawan, Eder (2008) has described the existence of similar attitudes towards the attribution of blame for the problems of environmental degradation in San Vicente. There, Eder reports (ibid.: 112), a strong distinction is made by locals between highly efficient and active operations, such as beach seining, and ‘truly’ illegal activities such as cyanide and dynamite fishing. Local residents argue that the truly illegal activities are the ones that the authorities should concentrate on regulating, as they are the ones that do the greatest amount
of damage. Eder also found that among the fishers he interviewed, ‘lingering problems with illegal fishing practices in San Vicente could be blamed primarily on intruders from other locales rather than on local residents’ (ibid.: 118). He goes on to argue that:

> [a]t a discursive level ... this frequently uttered proposition may be deployed to another truth and absolve local residents of responsibility for environmental damage. If outsiders are the cause of the damage, then they are the ones who should be monitored and reminded of the environmental rules. Local people tend not to see themselves as the ones who need monitoring (ibid.: 119–20).

Similarly, as I will show in the Calamianes, local knowledge about fishing is also ‘political’ knowledge, strategically deployed by residents in an effort to strengthen their claims. However, here I extend Eder’s description of this phenomenon to investigate the cultural frameworks that underlie this reasoning. A focus of my argument is that linked to these claims is the representation of legal fishing practices as moral, humble and tied to poverty.

**Understanding Poverty and Morality in the Philippines**

As illegal fishing is represented as a particularly immoral activity, legal fishing is seen as moral, in part because of its allegedly negligible effect on the environment, but also because of its close association with poverty. Hence the discussion of this chapter will focus on the close associations between legal fishing and poverty, arguing that fishing is widely viewed as an arduous, difficult occupation with very low social status. While in Chapter 3 I detailed some of the more objective characteristics of poverty, livelihoods and class relations, here I focus on subjective representations about fishing and poverty.

The latter part of this chapter builds on the work of Cannell (1999), who has written about a related, widespread and powerful discourse in the Philippines that is focused on pity and sympathy for the weak and poor. Cannell argues that poor people in Bicol present themselves as pitiful in order to enter into reciprocal relationships—the sorts of reciprocal relationships I identified in Chapter Three. She identifies a number of writers who have previously analysed these attitudes in different locations of the Philippines (ibid.: 231–4). Polo argued that in Leyte, fishermen used the idiom of pity to obtain help in cases of misfortune or hardship. A fisher seeking a loan would say: ‘How pitiful I am today. I will have to borrow something from you’ (Polo 1985: 56). In her ethnography of markets in Panay, Blanc-Szanton (1972: 129) argued that fishers claimed that ‘everyone has a right to survive and provide for his family—a right which transcends all other economic or legal considerations’. In this case, fish dealers and other fishers were obliged to share with those who had been
less successful, despite the lack of any clear economic incentive, ‘based on what is regarded as a fundamental human right to some minimal income with which to feed oneself and family, and the obligation of one’s fellows to provide it if possible’ (ibid.: 123).

Kerkvliet (1990) found the existence of a similar ethic among poor peasants in Central Luzon, who assert that ‘they are as human beings entitled to security and dignity. And if necessary, those needs and rights should be satisfied at the expense of others who have more than enough to assure their own fundamental rights’ (ibid: 269). While Kerkvliet suggests that this ‘basic rights discourse’ may have originated partly from the upheavals of the peasant Huk Rebellion in Central Luzon of the 1950s, he also emphasises particular features of Tagalog language and culture that may have contributed as well (ibid.: 272–3). He notes that classic accounts of Filipino culture (for example Hollnsteiner 1963; Lynch and De Guzman II 1970) have focused a lot of attention on more passive values such as *pakikisama* (the ability to get along with people) and *hiya* (shame or shyness), while ignoring various terms in Tagalog that convey far more active values related to the discourse outlined above. Kerkvliet (1990: 273) lists terms such as: rights (*karapatan*); equality (*pantay-pantay*); dignity (*karangalan* and *pagkatao*); humanity (*makatao*); justice (*katarungan*); freedom (*kalayaan*), the unity of self with others (*kapwa*); and treating others as equals, as human beings (*pakikipagkapwa*).

Drawing on the historical work of Scott (1983) and Rafael (1988), Cannell (1999: 237–9) suggests that these conceptions may have their origin in pre-colonial forms of social relations between commoners and the aristocrats. Since Cannell’s work has appeared, the work of Junker (1999) has provided a highly detailed analysis of pre-Hispanic political economy in the Philippines that lends support to this view. Junker emphasises that the power of local leaders was obtained through command of labour (as opposed to land), and that this meant that leaders had to attract and maintain followers through developing personal ties of reciprocity. As part of these dyadic relationships, leaders were obliged to fulfill reasonable requests from their followers for assistance (ibid.: 238).

Cannell (1999: 233) also makes the important point that ‘[it] would be as impossible as it is unnecessary to disengage many Filipino lowland terms from the history of Christianity’. It is perhaps enough to point out the powerful role of the Catholic Church in the Philippines and the Calamianes, with its associated morals of noblesse oblige and pity for the poor. Indeed, the ‘Church of the poor’ that the Catholic Church of the Philippines supposedly represents is explicit about this identification. Borchgrevink (2003) has similarly drawn attention to the ways in which the notion of sacrifice is a central idea throughout much of the Philippines: ‘Briefly put, the idea is that by undergoing some form of hardship, one will be able to help somebody else. The underlying idea is one of exchange:
by doing something for God (or for a saint)—praising, honouring or suffering for him somehow—it is expected that he will do a service in return’ (ibid.: 55). From this perspective, hardships and suffering because of poverty are related to sacrifice, and lend an air of nobility to poverty (see also Wiegele 2006: 502).

Former President Joseph Estrada is one public figure who was able to successfully appeal to this discourse focusing on the poor, and whose story illustrates the potency of this discourse in the Philippines (Plate 4-1). Using the nickname ‘Erap’, Estrada’s career is littered with references to pro-poor rhetoric: from his 1998 campaign slogan of *Erap para sa mahirap* (Erap for the poor), his portrayal of movie characters who identify themselves with the underdog, to his declaration upon winning the Presidency: ‘The common people have waited long enough for their turn, for their day to come. That day is here’ (cited in Doronila 2001: 2).

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Plate 4-1: Fernando Poe Jr (Presidential candidate in 2004) and Joseph Estrada (President 1998–2001) forged film careers playing characters identifying with the poor. *Tatak ng Tundo* was about life in the slums of Manila.

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1 *Erap* is *pare* backwards; a shortened form of ‘*compadre*’ and used by Joseph Estrada to identify with the common man. In colloquial Filipino *pare* means mate, buddy or pal.
Similarly, Rafael (2000) has analysed how Philippine national hero Jose Rizal’s potency rested on his ability to evoke populist visions of utopic communities held together by an ethos of mutual caring, the sharing of obligations (damayan), and the exchange of pity (awa). It was precisely this image of Rizal in conjunction with the suffering Christ—figures at once pathetic and prophetic—that was mobilized to explain the events that began with the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983 and ended with the People Power Revolt in 1986 that ousted the Marcoses from power. Predicated on the logics of suffering and sacrifice, the political culture of People Power and subsequent regime of Cory Aquino thrived on the notion of pity rather than equal rights to legitimate their claims to power and moral certainty’ (ibid.: 211–2; see also Rafael 2010: 173–4).

From 2005–10, television viewers could see the discourse of ‘pity’ played out every day on the game show Wowowee, which included a segment that involved the host questioning contestants about the circumstances of their life. Contestants, frequently coming from poor backgrounds, would routinely break down in tears as they described their difficulties. Moved by their distress and the accompanying emotive music, audiences would take pity on the contestants, and (depending on his mood) the host would offer them cash bonuses.

In the context of environmental regulation, the emphasis that NGOs frequently place on social justice in the Philippines (Austin 2003; Bryant 2005) is indicative of this perspective. Indeed, Bryant (2005) argues that a central strategic goal of NGOs in the Philippines is to accrue what he terms ‘moral capital’. While Bryant does not focus on the meanings of morality in the Philippines, I would suggest that the quest for moral capital among these NGOs is particularly pertinent in the Philippines because of the themes I have just surveyed.

The discourse of the poor moral fisher, I shall show, can be situated within these broader discourses of pity and sympathy for the poor in the Philippines. Fishers represent their practices as environmentally harmless, as difficult, humble, and closely tied to family and poverty: they are therefore deserving of pity. This next ethnographic section takes up this theme by detailing how illegal fishing is represented as the sole cause of environmental degradation.
Illegal Fishing as the Cause of Environmental Degradation

Perceptions of Environmental Degradation

As I described in Chapters 2 and 3, fishers in Esperanza have employed an extremely wide range of techniques and targeted many different species over a period of several decades. Lower fish catch has obviously been a key factor in the shift of fisheries activities in response to the various fisheries booms in the Calamianes. The shift has been characterised by basnig boats targeting scads and anchovies in the 1970s and early-1980s, to the largo boats targeting various first class fish in the 1980s, to the fusilier fishery that boomed during the 1990s, and lastly, the live and fresh grouper fisheries. This history, combined with the increasing level of inputs required such as more crew, more fuel for longer and further trips, and smaller mesh sizes for net fishing suggests that most fishers would have an understanding that fish stocks have changed over time.

When asked about the state of fisheries at the time of my fieldwork, most fishers had very similar views. In a survey I conducted in 2006 among 60 fishers of various types in Esperanza, 47–78 per cent—stated that there were fewer fish in their fishing grounds compared to when they first arrived to the sitio. The fusilier fishery that was so profitable in the 1990s was seen by many as a struggling fishery without a future 15 years on. One experienced fusilier-fishing captain told me that the fishery had ‘maybe five or seven years left’ in it before everyone else turned to either the live or fresh grouper fishery. Fishers complained that the number of crew required for a successful fishing trip had risen, that trips had to go for much longer and further away, and that expenses for fishing trips also rose while the price of the fusiliers had remained the same for a long time. Net fishers similarly complained of the increasing length of trips they had to finance just to break even: ‘It used to be we could just go there (pointing to the shore of Esperanza); or to San Andres (the neighbouring sitio to Esperanza). Sometimes we have to go to Bulalacao, Busuanga. We have to sleep on our boats sometimes; we have to stay three days sometimes now’. By 2009, the live fish trade was also seen as a fishery in decline. The area around Coron was widely seen as over fished, and those fishers who had the equipment and capital to do so went further afield (mostly to Linapacan) to richer fishing grounds (Fabinyi 2010).

When talking of the past state of fisheries in the Calamianes, many fishers often commented nostalgically on the ease of fishing. ‘Before, you could catch fish just inside here (pointing to Coron Bay)’ one fusilier-fishing captain observed. ‘You would only need to go fishing for three or four days, then you would have
enough fish’. Now, he described, most commercial fishing captains had to fish for a minimum of ten days to get the required amount of fish, and fishing had to be conducted further and further away. Many fishers related how fishing nowadays was thoroughly enmeshed within debt cycles. For them, the lack of easy fish catch had made their lives much more difficult. Fusilier fishing captain Geronimo, for example, said that:

When I first arrived here in the 1970s, life was good. I was fishing all year round (basnig), and even though we didn’t have much money then, life was easier. Starting in the 1980s though, basnig became weaker, and then by 1990s only fusiliers were good to fish. Now though, even fusiliers are weak now. We can only fish during habagat for fusiliers, and even then we have to fish further away—you can’t fish in Coron Bay anymore; you have to go to Dibangan, Liminancong, Dumaran (locations closer to or on the Palawan mainland). And I have to fish for much longer, at least ten days every trip now. Soon everyone will need to switch to the live fish trade or the fresh grouper fishery. And before, during amihan we used to fish largo, or even fusiliers still. But now I just do net fishing during this time.

Like Austin’s (2003) research with fishers in Honda Bay, Central Palawan, I found it difficult to get reliable quantitative information about the extent of environmental degradation in the area. This was due to both the unreliability of government statistics and the imprecision of fishers’ recollections. While the fishers’ nostalgia for the good days of the past may be exaggerated, it is nevertheless a key component of the discourse of the poor moral fisher. My survey results and interview data make it clear that most fishers—of all gear types—had a strong perception that fish stocks were declining in their fishing grounds. Many of the net fishers suggested that over the last ten years in particular stocks had been declining especially fast. Common estimates of average catches of rabbitfish for a one-day trip, for example, ranged from 20–40 kg, compared to 50–70 kg ten years before.²

**National and Local Variations of ‘Illegal’ Fishing**

The notion of ‘illegal’ fishing is a contested one in the Philippines, and can reflect a range of activities that occur in Philippine waters. Perhaps most commonly, the term describes the activities of commercial scale vessels that intrude into municipal waters. Numerous studies have documented the prevalence of such activities in the Philippines (for example Russell and Alexander 2000). Such vessels have included the Danish seine or hulbot-hulbot, purse seining vessels

² Eder reported similar declines among fishermen in San Vicente, where estimations of fish catch fell from an average of 30–50 kg a day in 1980 to about 10 kg a day in 1997 (Eder 2008: 101).
and various sorts of trawlers. In Palawan, this is often associated with the activities of foreign vessels arriving from the South China Sea. Several recent cases have been heavily publicised in the Philippine media. In December 2006, the Chinese MV Hoi Wan was caught in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Tubbataha Reefs in the Sulu Sea with more than 1500 live fish, including more than 350 CITES protected, endangered Napoleon Wrasse (Jimenez-David 2007). And in September 2007, another Chinese vessel was found to be holding more than 200 turtles (mostly endangered green sea turtles), 10 000 turtle eggs and two live pelagic thresher sharks when boarded for a routine inspection (Wildlife Extra 2007).

More recently in 2008, the Palawan fisheries authorities encountered numerous cases of Vietnamese fishers fishing around southern Palawan (Anda 2008a, 2008b). Commercial fishing in inshore areas of the Calamianes was common in the 1970s, and Wright (1978) declared then that more serious than the problem of dynamite fishing was ‘the indiscriminant [sic] inshore trawling practiced by vessels from Manila which destroys plant and animal life in the shallows, and the physical environment that supports life’ (ibid.: 123; see also Fabinyi forthcoming). During my stay in 2005–07, less commercial fishing was conducted in areas close to shore, except for municipally registered vessels. At night, however, the glow of the baby purse seiners were sometimes seen, especially in more remote areas of the Calamianes where they would enter into the 15 km municipal zone. Since 2008, a large commercial operation, called lintig (a smaller version of muro-ami fishing) had been operating in inshore waters around Coron with the cooperation of the municipal authorities, an issue that had stoked resentment among some local residents, especially those who fished inshore waters.

Dynamite fishing is another common form of illegal fishing in the Philippines, and Wright (1978: 123) reported its existence in the Calamianes back in 1978. The technique involves using a glass bottle filled with dynamite; the lit wick is thrown into the water near schooling fish, causing an explosion that kills or stuns the fish, making it easy to scoop them up. Dynamite not only kills all of the nearby fish life but also causes great damage to coral reefs. In more remote parts of the Calamianes, where the level of law enforcement is low, dynamite is often alleged to be used in various types of fresh fisheries. During 2006–07, several exporters of fresh fish to Manila in the Calamianes were found with fish killed by dynamite on board their vessels.³ In August 2007, three sacks of ammonium nitrate, an agent used in explosives, were found on a cargo ship bound for Coron while in port at Manila (GMANews.TV 2007).

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³ Unlike fish killed using cyanide, which requires a chemical test to determine the presence of cyanide, fish killed with explosives are often easier to detect as their internal flesh and organs are frequently damaged and bloody. (Fishers often disguise this by salting and drying the fish.)
Cyanide fishing is most closely associated with both forms of the live fish trade in the Philippines: the live reef fish for food trade, and the marine ornamental aquarium trade. The technique is quite simple: cyanide tablets are dissolved in water, which is then squirted on to reef, stunning the fish, which are then easily collected. Cyanide also destroys corals (Cervino et al. 2003). Dalabajan (2005), an environmental law expert in the Philippines, estimates that there were around 250,000 cyanide fishing trips between 1999 and 2002 in the Calamianes. He argues that the reason for this large number is the incapacity of the local governments to enforce the relevant laws.

Accusations of corruption in fisheries governance were routine among fishers I interviewed on the issue. According to Padilla et al. (2003: 87), local fishers ‘indicated that the reason why illegal activities persist was the strong link between unscrupulous traders/operators and law enforcement agents’. Furthermore, some conservationists were concerned that two of the three biggest live fish traders in Coron town were also council members of the municipal government.

Finally, there are a range of fishing practices which are often technically illegal but are usually far more openly contested. These include the use of certain active gears that may be locally regulated, such as beach seining or the use of fine mesh nets. Fishing within protected areas, while technically illegal, is not viewed with the same degree of abhorrence by local fishers, and as I show in Chapters 5 and 6, it is a highly contested issue. Usually, when people talk about ‘illegal fishing’ methods in the Calamianes they are referring to one of two types of fishing: the use of cyanide or, less frequently, dynamite.

Illegal Fishing is to Blame

In the survey I undertook of the fishers in Esperanza, 36 of the 47 fishers who stated that there was less fish catch in their fishing grounds since arriving in Esperanza—or 77 per cent of the 47 who gave this answer—went on to say that the primary cause of this situation was because of the activities of the illegal fishers (illegalistas).4 When returning from their commercial fishing trips

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4 Agrawal asserts that transformations in patterns of resource use among rural communities in Kumaon, India, are dependent on two related beliefs: ‘(1) nature is an entity discrete from humans and endangered by reckless human actions; and (2) this endangered nature needs protection, which can be generated in the form of careful government’ (Agrawal 2005: 201). Once these beliefs arise, he argues, ‘[t]hose who see the environment as requiring protection are more likely to put greater effort in their protectionist practices’ (ibid.: 163). Fishers in Esperanza certainly have a very real sense that environmental degradation is occurring as a result of human actions, and, as I detail in Chapter 7, fishers also feel very strongly about the need for ‘careful government’ and wise regulation. However, fishers represent the causes of environmental degradation as only the result of ‘some’ human actions and not others. While fishers in Esperanza may hold both of the beliefs very strongly that the marine environment can be damaged by human actions, and that the marine environment requires protection, the beneficial patterns of resource use that Agrawal suggests will follow on from these beliefs have not occurred. This is because of the ways that fishers allocate responsibility for environmental degradation, asserting that illegal fishers only are to blame.
to Dibangan and Tawi-Tawi, fishers would relate how they frequently see other boats out at sea, fishing with dynamite. While fishing captains in the fusilier fishery would be happy if they caught around two tons of fish during a regular trip, they said that it was easily possible to catch up to three or four tons of fish using dynamite. They emphatically declared, however, that they did not use dynamite themselves, because it was illegal. Similarly, fishers in the live reef fish trade would complain that all of the corals in their favourite fishing grounds were damaged because of the use of cyanide.

Carlos Marquez, for example, said that he was very ‘proud’ that he had never used illegal fishing methods:

> Often when I go fishing in Dibangan, I see boats from Batangas, from Lucena … they use dynamite to blow up the fish. I get very angry because it spoils the reefs for the rest of us. I tell them it is banned, but they don’t listen…. To me, the difference is between short and long term thinking. Those who want to get rich quickly, who want to make lots of money and don’t care about anything else, they will go for illegal fishing. But if you want to think about your children, and if you want to do the right thing, you will stick to legal fishing.

Similarly, fusilier-fishing captain Geronimo angrily declared that:

> it is the illegal fishers who have wrecked the good fishing grounds for everyone else. Out in Reed Bank (in the South China Sea, location of largo fishing) now the place is no good anymore…. All these Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Taiwanese boats have used trawlers and dynamite to damage them. And here too, even in Calamianes, cyanide has been used everywhere. Maybe it is the poor people with ten children who do that sort of fishing, but the problem is with the bosses, with the drug lords.

Many other fishers also resented the way that the government would let the ‘drug lords’ fish illegally with impunity. Fusilier fishing captain Manuel remarked sarcastically, for example, that illegal fishers from other countries were ‘welcome in the Philippines’. The perception was that while legal fishers tried hard to do the right thing, and suffered in poverty as a result, illegal fishers became rich and went unpunished. Such resentment became more overt during the provincial government’s attempt to impose regulations on the live fish trade, the topic of Chapter Seven.

While fishers in Esperanza squarely blamed the illegal fishers for environmental degradation, they denied any suggestion that their own activities may have been damaging to the environment. One captain, for example, asserted that ‘if everybody used legal methods, the fish won’t get finished’. When I asked Geronimo about whether he thought his fishing activities could potentially be
harmful to the environment or reducing fish stocks, he confidently declared that this was not possible, responding with the quote I placed at the beginning of the chapter. As I describe in detail in Chapters 5 through to 7, these sorts of perspectives meant that in the opinion of the fishers, any regulations formed by the government should focus entirely on cracking down on illegal fishing. Informants would also sometimes acknowledge or concede that part of the problem had to be simply because of the large influx to Esperanza and the Calamianes of fishers of all types, illegal and legal, over the last 30 years. The extent to which illegal fishing was consistently to blame (both among survey respondents and through everyday conversations) for all reef degradation and stock depletion, however, was enough to strike me as particularly significant.

Fishers did not necessarily base these assertions about the relative damage of legal and illegal fishing on detailed or thorough understandings about ecological processes. Understanding of ecology among fishers was notably limited. Questions about seasonal migration patterns of fusiliers, for example, would often elicit vague, inaccurate and wildly varied responses. Some of these included fusiliers: migrating ‘to another country’ or warmer waters; swimming to deep water to feed on different prey during the non-fishing season; diving to the bottom of the sea to lay their eggs during certain periods; and to become hungry because of a lack of their normal food during the fishing season and thus be tempted by the bait of the fishers.5

The radical dichotomy between the damage caused by legal and illegal fishing that fishers expressed bears a resemblance in many ways to what Johnson (2006) has described as discourses that ‘valorise’ small-scale fisheries, similar to the idealisation of traditional ecological knowledge. Johnson argues that such discourses ascribe values such as social justice and ecological sustainability to small-scale fisheries (ibid.: 747). He demonstrates in his article that ‘[t]hese powerful but not always explicitly acknowledged valuations do not necessarily correspond to the reality of small-scale fisheries, which can be exploitative and ecologically destructive’ (ibid.). Similarly, a recent report by the WWF has argued that ‘to say simplistically that “small-scale” fisheries are “low impact” is a false and dangerous generalization’ (WWF 2008), citing numerous examples from around the world where small-scale fishers have been the primary causes behind resource depletion and environmental degradation.

5 This is not to say that fishers have little local knowledge—on the contrary, fishers demonstrate an exceptionally deep knowledge of aspects of fishing including knowing where to fish, the use of successful techniques and understanding of many different weather conditions. Instead, what I observed in Esperanza is similar to what others writing about local marine ecological knowledge have detected (Foale 1998; Pollnac and Johnson 2005; Sabetian and Foale 2006). Foale (1998: 200), for example, has argued that ‘m[uch of the local knowledge possessed by subsistence, artisanal and commercial fishers is focused on how to locate individuals of a target species in space and time, and, once located, how to capture them’. Such knowledge can be detailed and impressive, but frequently lacks information about specific ecological relationships such as reproductive biology and stock dispersal (Sabetian and Foale 2006: 8).
Data from NGOs about the extent of environmental degradation in the Calamianes has focused on the effects of the live fish trade. Reports from WWF, CI, and the FISH project all emphasise the high level of overfishing and stock decline in the grouper fishery. Reporting on the extent of damaged coral cover, Padilla et al. (2003: 52) found high percentages of dead coral in their surveys in 2001, ranging from 20–100 per cent in selected sites.

Importantly, they make the point that ‘it is difficult to assume that all “dead corals” are in fact caused by cyanide’ (ibid.: 50), noting that many other factors may have also contributed. They point out that ‘[d]etecting the effects of cyanide on coral reefs at the Calamianes has been difficult’ (ibid.: 53) because of the possibility of other factors, and that overfishing more generally certainly has many causes. Their overall conclusions and recommendations for management stress the broad problem of overfishing as the primary causal factor. They attribute this problem of overfishing to many causes, including increased migration to the Calamianes, a lack of stock quotas or other effective regulatory measures such as protected areas in spawning locations, and the apparent prevalence of cyanide use. Similarly, a CI report in 1998 attributed the parlous state of the fisheries in the region to a combination of illegal and legal methods (Werner and Allen 2000: 60–2). The authors assert that the basic problem of overfishing, while partly caused by cyanide, is also fundamentally because of the sheer increase in fishers in the Calamianes over a long period.

In Esperanza, therefore, it is likely that assertions illegal fishing is solely to blame for all environmental degradation, while legal fishing is not, are not based on detailed ecological analyses about the impact of fishing on stocks. When questioned about how, exactly, cyanide and dynamite fishing had reduced stocks whereas other techniques such as hook-and-line had not, fishers would point to the increased capacity to fish using illegal methods, and the damage that they did to corals, which they often described as the ‘home’ of the fish. These two points are of course correct—illegal fishing clearly does contribute to overfishing and the destruction of corals. That legal fishing, however, is represented by fishers as completely harmless, in such contrast to illegal fishing, points to other forces and ideas at play. Instead of being simple accounts of ecological change, an important point to note about discussions of illegal and legal fishing in Esperanza is the ways in which they are framed within discourses of identity, locality and morality.

**Identity and Legality**

Illegal fishing is a ‘hot’ political issue in Coron, one with many murky layers of gossip among various actors. When asked who these illegal fishers actually were, fishers and other residents of Esperanza would always refer to another group of
people. When it was fishing within the marine protected areas near Esperanza under discussion, always fishers from town or from another barangay were blamed. Similarly, cyanide fishing was only ever conducted by those outside the barangay, according to anyone within the barangay. At a larger geographical scale, when people talked about dynamite fishing in the more remote, outer reaches of the Calamianes and Palawan waters, it was always boats from Marinduque, Lucena and especially Batangas that were cited as the culprits. The illegal fishers more generally were depicted as unscrupulous, thirsting for easy money at the expense of the smaller fishermen. In the words of Raul, a net fisherman during amihan and crewman on commercial fusilier boats during habagat who had lived in Esperanza since the 1970s: ‘These people, they come from Marinduque and Mindoro, and they fish everything here. These people all live in town; they will just do something else or move on once all the fish are finished. But we, the fishermen here in Esperanza, we have no option but to stay here and keep fishing’. Similarly, live reef fish collector Roly argued that ‘these transient fishers, they come from the Visayas to here because this place Palawan has the most fish out of all the Philippines. They come here because there are no fish left in the Visayas; they have finished them already’.

I argue that part of the explanation for this response lies in concepts of identity and morality. This argument draws upon the work of Walley (2004) in Mafia, Tanzania, and Zayas (1994) elsewhere in the Visayan Islands. In a similar case, recent migrants and other ‘socially marginal individuals’ (Walley 2004: 55) were blamed for dynamite fishing. Walley argues that the social networks and sanctions among the original inhabitants or owners discourage them from participating in dynamite fishing, whereas those without such networks ‘are more likely to engage in activities that are personally profitable but are an anathema to Mafia residents’ (ibid.: 56).

In the Visayan Islands, a similar insider/outside dichotomy can be observed among coastal residents. Here, sojourning fishermen (pangayaw), are contrasted with local residents (tumandok) (Zayas 1994). Zayas has described how in many parts of the Visayas, sojourning fishermen will migrate to different islands for fishing, dependent on the seasons of amihan and habagat. These migratory fisher groups construct and maintain social relationships with local residents, exchanging fishing knowledge, technology and capital for the rights to fish in the area. She speculates that as resources are depleted, it would be more difficult to maintain these relationships. Versions of such relationships continued at the time of my own fieldwork in various parts of the Visayas, including Negros Oriental and Cebu (personal communication, Magne Knudsen and Shio Segi, May 2008).

In the Calamianes, the Cebuano terms pangayaw and tumandok are rarely used in everyday conversations, at least not by the Tagalog-speaking fishermen I spoke
with regularly; but there is a common distinction between people who are ‘from here’ (taga rito) and ‘migrants’ (mga dayuhan) or ‘not from here’ (hindi taga rito). Which category someone belongs to depends completely on the speaker’s perspective. Many local residents of Esperanza, for example, would confidently assert that they are ‘from here’, arguing that they had been there for more than 30 years, or among the younger population, that they had been born there. For many of the Cuyonon residents, the expatriate population and the indigenous Tagbanua population around Coron, all Visayan migrants (the vast majority of whom have migrated since the post-war period) are ‘not from here’. At a broad level, it is these ‘Visayans’ who are most frequently blamed for illegal fishing by these residents of Coron.

Among the fishers I worked with however, there is a sub-category of ‘Visayan’ concerning fishers in the Calamianes who are transient, in the manner of the sojournning fishermen described earlier. Such fishers ‘keep coming back’ (balik-balik). A small island off Coron Island is host to one such community of transient Boholanos who first started to visit the area about 1986. At the time of my fieldwork they moved between the island off Coron, an island in neighbouring Culion municipality and their original home of Bohol. Fishers elsewhere in the Calamianes and environmentalists allege many of this community’s fishers practice cyanide and dynamite fishing. Similarly, many of the residents of Esperanza were originally transient fishers, especially coming from the Waray-speaking region of Northern Samar. As reports filtered back to Samar in the 1970s about the relative success of residents who had already migrated to Esperanza, acquaintances and relatives from Samar came and fished during the habagat monsoon. Some were transient for many years before settling down permanently in Esperanza.

This pattern of intermittently fishing and then settling down to live permanently in the region has been common for a long time, and transient fishing continued during the period of my fieldwork. Wright (1978) reported that many of the migrants who eventually settled in the Calamianes originally appeared there as crewmen on fishing vessels from Manila. By 1978, Wright states, ‘[i]tinerant fishermen in numbers up to about 2000 are always present’ (ibid.: 66). In Coron town and the surrounding barangays when I was living there, other groups of small-scale transient fishers would sometimes appear, especially during the prime fishing season of habagat between May and September. They would report to the barangay captain, who would usually give them permission to stay (for a fee), in a manner similar to that outlined by Zayas (1994) in the Visayas. Similarly, some baby purse seining vessels would obtain permission from individual barangays to operate in nearby waters for a season at a time.
This would also usually involve negotiation and a payment of some kind to the barangay, such as payment for a specific infrastructure project (such as, building a jetty or basketball court).

Many fishers, however, fish transiently for periods of time without necessarily basing themselves at a particular location. On relatively small-scale vessels, fishers will still be able to make trips of several days at a time, so they can come from various locations around Northern Palawan to fish in the Calamianes. Esperanza fishers, for example, will frequently fish for live grouper without formal municipal permits on reefs in other parts of the Calamianes, or in northern mainland Palawan. Unlike when fishers base themselves in a particular location, or when fishers conduct gillnet fishing in locations very close to shore, such (small-scale) fishing in open water appears to be regarded as relatively open-access by other fishers. As one fisher put it, talking of his experiences fishing for live grouper without a permit in Linapacan, ‘they are not that strict for this type of fishing…. We are all fishers and we understand that you need to go to different locations to fish…. It is only when people start using illegal methods that other fishers start getting angry’.

Since 2005, however, the Coron municipal government has been attempting to reduce this sort of fishing through the introduction of registration for all municipal fishing vessels. This is in large part an initiative of the FISH project. Under the proposed legislation, all boats, gears and fishers will have to be registered with the municipality, and greater powers will be given to fish wardens from the barangays to enforce these laws. The primary aim of this new legislation is to make it more difficult for transient fishers to fish in Coron waters.

One possible line of argument is that transient fishers are probably responsible for a lot of the illegal fishing. Without the complex sets of social networks that long-term residents had, such fishers would potentially feel more able to conduct socially disruptive activities such as illegal fishing. As I will argue in Chapter 6, young men from the Calamianes who do not see their long-term future in local fishing, and who are under greater pressure to demonstrate their economic prowess, are also more likely to participate. This situation of relating illegal fishing tensions to tensions about social identity therefore bears a close resemblance to that described by Walley (2004).

A different argument, however, would be that transient fishers are not actually responsible, but that they are simply easier to blame.6 From this perspective, it may be a case of the situation foreshadowed by Zayas (1994) in the Visayas; where the local residents simply decide not to allocate as many rights to incoming residents is shown to be a powerful determining factor in social status and the apportioning of blame for illegal fishing.

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6 See for example Knudsen (in Fabinyi et al. 2010: 623–5), for a case in Negros Oriental where length of residence is shown to be a powerful determining factor in social status and the apportioning of blame for illegal fishing.
migratory fishers as fishing pressure increases. Whether transient fishers are actually responsible or not for illegal fishing, however, is not really the point. What is interesting here is the ways in which outsiders are framed as responsible; these discourses about social identity thus infuse any discussion of illegal fishing with an explicitly strategic perspective. As with the situation described by Eder (2008: 119–20) in San Vicente, ascribing the causes of environmental degradation to the activities of outsiders means that the activities of local fishers should not be regulated.

This contrast and tension between recent and long-term residents mirrors in some ways the more commonly described tension between small-scale or artisanal fishers and commercial fishing boats. In the Philippines, such tensions have been commonly described, especially within the fisheries management literature (for example Russell and Alexander 2000; Green et al. 2003). In the Calamianes, however, this tension is not as clear as in many other parts of the Philippines and the developing world. Instead of being a relatively straightforward case of contestation between small-scale and commercial fishers, fishers (both small-scale and commercial) in the Calamianes that I worked with are more concerned about the distinction between legal and illegal fishers. As I indicated earlier, by 2006 commercial fishing within municipal waters of the Calamianes was not generally considered as problematic as it used to be. The discourse of the poor moral fisher, therefore, is not only another version of the same complaints about large-scale commercial fishing that small-scale fishers have made across the developing world (see Bavinck 2005). In addition, this discourse is also concerned with more locally specific notions about what illegality actually means in the Philippines.

**Morality and Legality**

Depictions by residents in the Calamianes of illegal fishers as unprincipled and predatory outsiders resonate with how the practice is conceived in terms of morality. People frequently link the prevalence of illegal fishing to the prevalence of degenerate behaviour more broadly in local society. One local municipal councillor, for example, identified the central, indeed the only significant problem in Coron to be illegal activities: ‘Coron is a very good municipality now. It will become a great municipality once it eliminates these illegal activities. Illegal fishing and drugs are the only big problems Coron faces’. Fishers liken illegal fishing to a vice, like gambling or drinking, which are ‘easy’ but immoral ways to spend your time. Because it is illegal however, this means that it attracts far worse condemnation than other vices.

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7 Indeed throughout the developing world, this is one of the most commonly observed types of fisheries conflict. As Bavinck (2005: 806) points out, ‘[t]he issue of conflict between small-scale and modern fisheries … continues to color the everyday experiences of millions of fishers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America’.
The act of illegality seems to transform the behaviour from an environmentally damaging fishing technique into a transgression against society. This is similar to the way many other illegal activities are represented in the Philippines. Sensationalist media coverage of drug problems tends to depict drug-takers simplistically, as moral deviants who have betrayed their family and society. There is no complexity or ‘grey area’ here; they are simply condemned as morally wrong. From a symbolic perspective then, the representation of certain types of fishing as ‘illegal’ takes on greater significance. The emphasis on the term ‘illegal’ can be seen partly as a trope or symbolic reference to underlying fears of other illegal activities (Geertz 1973: 193–233). Illegality is identified as extremely morally wrong; and because cyanide and dynamite fishing are illegal, they become morally wrong.

Such a moralistic perspective shapes the way that illegal fishers and fishing are analysed. This moralism has been linked by Mulder (2000: 184) to the way the public sphere is commonly represented in the media, literature and education in the Philippines: ‘[t]hrough the ahistorical and anti-sociological treatment of the twentieth century, history and society silt up in a muddle, and no intellectual tools are handed down to develop systematic comprehension of the wider world. Often moralism substitutes for reason. To save the country, we need a moral revolution!’. The fact that legal fishing can also be (and inevitably is) damaging to fish stocks is obscured by this moral perspective.

I have shown here how conceptions of illegal fishing as the sole cause of environmental degradation are not necessarily based on empirically demonstrated realities that show the effects of illegal fishing compared to legal fishing. The ideas of illegal fishing as morally wrong and environmentally destructive, and legal fishing as morally right and harmless, are not only based in ecological understandings, but also in tensions between new arrivals and long-term residents, and in broader conceptions about morality.

While illegal fishing is associated with immorality, wealth, and outsiders, legal fishing relates to morality, poverty and family. In order to develop this point it is necessary to appreciate how fishing in the Philippines is understood as an occupation closely linked with poverty. The following discussion looks further into the discourse of the poor moral fisher, by examining the ways in which fishing is represented by fishers and others in Philippine society as a livelihood marked by hardship, uncertainty and low status.
'Legal’ Fishing and Poverty

The Difficult Nature of Fishing

Fishers in Esperanza represent fishing as a particularly difficult occupation, and one which is not a ‘real’ profession. Instead, fishing is often viewed and practiced as a frontier establishment strategy, or as a ‘last-resort’ livelihood. This section of my argument critically engages with the arguments of Pollnac et al. (2001b: 532), who assert that ‘[t]he assumption that fishers will readily shift to alternative occupations’ is based on untested beliefs about fishing as an undesirable job, and fishers as the poorest of the poor. Based on survey results from the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam, they conclude that ‘[i]t is clear that in all three countries, fishers like their occupation and only a minority would change to another occupation, with similar income, if it were available’ (ibid.: 541).

Pollnac et al. (2001b) are certainly correct to critique the occasionally naïve assumptions of fisheries managers who have sometimes taken for granted the ease of transferring fishers to alternative livelihoods. They also cite evidence that in many countries fishers are not the poorest of the poor. In many parts of the Calamianes, it is also true that inland farmers are understood to be the poorest people. However, I suggest in this section that Pollnac et al.’s (2001b) conclusions about the high levels of job satisfaction fishers experience, their positive views of fishing, and their unwillingness to change occupation may be stretching the point somewhat. Unfortunately, the quantitative surveys undertaken by Pollnac et al. (2001b) do not provide the in-depth qualitative data necessary to analyse the more complex ways fishers understand their practices. Another survey of fishers in Coron using similar simple questions, for example, found that a majority would be willing to change occupation (Baum and Maynard 1976: 40). While these two studies obviously addressed different times, economic conditions and specific locales, the point is that fishers will respond in a variety of ways to formal survey questions about alternative livelihoods, and that generalisations such as those of Pollnac et al. (2001b) do not necessarily always apply.

In my view, a more helpful approach is offered by Eder (2003), who, writing about coastal communities in mainland Palawan, emphasises the ways that:

fishing itself, as a livelihood option, is always located on a wider field of other livelihood options. And just as not all fisherfolk used to fish for a living, not all remain fishers. The numerous former fisherfolk I encountered are a reminder that fishing is something that is also abandoned in favour of other occupations, both within the lifetimes
of individuals and—importantly—across generations in ‘fishing’ households ... fishing was [frequently] not a career or a lifelong occupation so much as a household’s establishment strategy, in much the same fashion as swiddening or kaingin may function as an establishment strategy on an agricultural frontier (ibid.: 215–6).

Eder also stresses that rarely is fishing the sole livelihood of coastal residents in countries like the Philippines.8

I have found similar practices and attitudes towards fishing among the residents of Esperanza. Often, fishing is not seen as a traditional ‘occupation’ like working in an office or as a labourer, but as simply a last-resort means to get by. When I conducted my first household survey at the beginning of my fieldwork, one of the questions I asked concerned what profession people held. Frequently, people would simply tell me that they had no profession. When I rephrased the question to ask how they got their income, they would then look at me, as if I was stupid, and tell me ‘fishing, of course’. As I discussed earlier in Chapter 2, many of the residents who had moved to Esperanza did so not necessarily because they had been fishers in their earlier lives throughout the country. Bong, for example, had been a farmer in Panay for many years before turning to mining, and, when he moved out of that job, moved to Esperanza in the hope of succeeding in fishing, where he was at the time of fieldwork the engine-man on one of the commercial fusilier boats. He saw fishing as a central establishment strategy adopted relatively easily in a foreign province where he had few connections: ‘If you don’t know many people, then fishing is the easiest job to start with’.

Vicente, another fisherman, had been based in Manila for many years working as a labourer. When he found the expenses of this lifestyle too overwhelming, he came to Esperanza to live with his cousins and began net fishing: ‘Manila was too difficult, my rent was too high, there are so many pressures there. I found myself hungry at times. So I decided to come and work with my family here. The only job I can do here is fishing though’. Similarly, Danny was a younger man who had originally fished on his father-in-law’s fusilier boat. He moved to Manila for several years in the hope of making more money. After three years working in a factory with little money saved, he returned to Esperanza: ‘I didn’t really succeed in Manila, so I came back to work with my father-in-law on his fishing boat’. Young men of Esperanza, in particular, view fishing as something that is hopefully only going to be temporary (see Chapter 6). Commercial fusilier-fishing captain Manuel summed up the situation of many in Esperanza when he said that ‘many people weren’t fishermen before they came here. They came here just to look for a better life’.

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8 Acheson (1981: 291) has cited various studies from around the world that concur with this point.
While fishers view their work with pride and clearly take a measure of satisfaction in it, as Pollnac et al. (2001b) rightfully point out, they also consistently emphasise the harder and more challenging aspects of the work. Fishers in the commercial fusilier, fresh and live grouper fisheries in particular, cite the lengthy trips (up to two weeks at a time) as challenging; mentally and physically. Bad weather, cramped and uncomfortable sleeping conditions, lack of access to fresh water for bathing, simple food and the emotional stress that comes with spending long times away from the family are just some of the hardships experienced by these fishers. When I first arrived in Esperanza, my requests to join these trips were met with comments like ‘It is difficult! You will find it too hard’. Most small-scale fishers also emphasise the physical difficulties such as sitting in the open sun at sea for hours at a time, or of fighting the challenging weather and large waves. As I describe in more detail in Chapter 6, overcoming these difficulties with style and bravery is a sign of masculinity and status, but there is little doubt that fishers view their work as difficult and arduous as well.

Geronimo’s description of his recent life history is a reminder of the difficult lives of many fishers in this community:

I run up high debts with my fishing now. Each of my [fusilier fishing] trips costs about ₱80 000 to put on, and I have five different creditors who finance my trips. They each give me around ₱10–20 000. It is much harder to find financiers now; previously everyone was willing to help out but now maybe only five per cent of people are willing to give loans. Most of the profits I make now just go to my creditors; it’s like I’m just working for them. Now I’m just getting by: I have enough money to eat and run my fishing trips, but not enough to keep my child in school in Panay and not enough to look after my [75 years] old mother in Panay. Now I’m very keen to move to the live fish trade, at the moment I’m looking for a financier to get me the engine. I want to send my child to college.

But still, it could be worse. In 2002 my child drowned in a boat accident. Then one of my other children decided to stop studying, then my other child got sick with appendicitis. He was sick for weeks and I spent all my savings. Then I hurt my back and I didn’t have enough money to see a doctor for myself. I couldn’t even walk for one year and fifteen days; only now I am completely physically fit again. So since this bad time, I cannot recover all of my debts and life is much more difficult.

This is not to say that fishers never come to enjoy their occupation, find it fulfilling, or are always able to transfer to another job. Fishers would talk with pride about their skill as a captain and their knowledge and experience at sea.
Importantly, social status within the community is often determined by fishing skill and success. However, the point remains that while fishers may ascribe status, pride, and satisfaction to their livelihood of fishing, it remains a difficult and low-paid job.

When describing some of their hardships, fishers would often explicitly use the idiom of pity (awá). Fishers would describe themselves as pitiful (kawawa) during the difficult fishing season of amihan, for example, or with reference to a bad catch. Conversely, an old woman suggested once that God had ‘taken pity on her’ and given her a long and healthy life. With reference to illegal fishing, fishers would often talk of themselves as being pitiful because of the actions of illegal fishers. For example, holding up ten fingers, one older fisherman said that ‘out of every ten people in Palawan, five are good and five are bad’. Closing the fingers of his right fist, he went on, ‘these five are pitiful, but the other five—ay! They are rich!’

A key feature of fishing that make fishers view it as especially difficult is its uncertain nature. In an older review of the anthropology of fishing, Acheson (1981: 276) pointed out that ‘[f]ishing takes place in a very heterogeneous and uncertain environment. This uncertainty stems not only from the physical environment, but also from the social environment in which fishing takes place’. Various anthropologists in different countries have documented characteristics of the uncertain and risky environment that fishers must endure that include: the sea being an alien and dangerous environment; it is difficult to see fish (even with the aid of fish-finders); a lack of property rights; long hours; and the psychologically stressful nature of the work (ibid.: 276–7). Acheson (1981) also identifies various strategies fishers have adopted, such as share payment systems, an egalitarian emphasis, flexibility in crew recruitment, patterns of determining access to fishing rights, the development of personalised relationships with middlemen, and the use of ritual and magic.

An important element of local ideas about fishing in Esperanza (and elsewhere in the Philippines) is its association with the concept of ‘luck’ (suwerte). The role of luck and uncertainty does not necessarily distinguish the worldviews of fishers in the Philippines from those of fishers in many other countries, but it contributes to the sense that fishing is a difficult occupation. The uncertain nature of fishing, and the fisher’s reliance on luck, is key in understanding how fishing is associated with difficulty. Szanton (1971: 60) for example, has argued that among fishers in neighbouring Panay during the 1960s, their worldview...
was shaped by a strong sense of fatalism: ‘Good luck will yield riches, bad luck will deny them, and there is little one can do about it. Wealth will come, if at all, when it is in the nature of things to appear’. 9

I do not interpret the comments about luck made by fishers in Esperanza to reflect the same degree of fatalism that Szanton saw as present among fishers in Panay during the 1960s. Captains of the commercial boats, in particular, tend to ascribe a greater level of relative success or otherwise to their skills, knowledge and experience, as well as to luck. 10 However, I do contend that most of the fishers in Esperanza, and certainly all of those associated with the smaller boats, have a very strong sense of the role of luck in determining their place in the world. Fishers frequently complain of the uncertain nature of their income—some days they return with little or no catch; and despite the skills and knowledge of experienced fishers, sometimes even they are unsuccessful. On many days during the windy season of amihan, fishers would wait glumly in their houses, waiting for the weather to change. While fishers attribute a significant degree of success to the captains’ skill and knowledge, fishers are often simply unlucky. ‘Jackpot-jackpot lang kami’11 was how one live fish collector characterised his lifestyle, meaning that fishers simply move from jackpot-to-jackpot, with little security or certainty. Because of the highly variable nature of its income (see Chapter 6), hook-and-line fishers in particular feel this insecurity, yet I argue that in Esperanza all fishers feel a significant degree of uncertainty in their occupation.

This is apparent not only in comments fishers make about their lifestyle or the empirical range and fluctuations of fish catches, but also through the manner in which religion is expressed. Russell and Alexander (1996: 437–8) explain that in the Batangas fishing community they studied, amulets, magical rituals and baptisms from the Catholic Church are all employed by fishers as means of ensuring better fishing success. Polo (1985) has documented in detail how fishers in Binlayan, Leyte, constructed and practiced elaborate rituals invoking the spirits and people of the sea. Similarly, in Esperanza, fishers regularly call upon religion. Although I did not observe the use of amulets or magical rituals in fishing, boats are baptised, complete with godparents who act as advisors to the boat. Sermons usually involve pleas for protection by God, and prayers

9 Veloro (1994) has also illustrated, drawing from a case study in Southern Palawan, how *suwerte* in the Philippines can mean luck as in good fortune or chance, or it can also refer to an attribute of a person, as in with reference to their ‘fate’. Small-scale fishers in one Palawan *barangay* Veloro was writing about attributed success in fishing to *suwerte*.

10 This, I would argue, is because of what is described in maritime anthropology as the ‘skipper effect’ (Pálsson and Durrenberger 1990; Russell and Alexander 1996). This effect refers to whether or not there is the perception that the role of a skipper plays a significant role in determining the size of the catch. Following Pálsson and Durrenberger (1990), and Russell and Alexander (1996) in the Philippines, I found that this sort of effect was present among more capitalised fleets with less personal labour recruitment—the commercial fusilier and fresh grouper boats.

11 This is a ‘Taglish’ (mix of Tagalog and English) phrase meaning that fishers simply live off ‘jackpots’.
are often said before a trip. Often, fishers simply say that whether they have a good catch or not and whether their life is looked after or not, is simply left in the hands of God and reflects their level of luck. This uncertainty is seen as something that makes fishing more difficult than other occupations: ‘Farming is something you can do every day, but fishing … what can we do when the weather is bad, when a storm comes? We have to be lucky if we are to do well in fishing’, said Ray, an older commercial boat captain.

Plate 4-2: Fishing in the hot sun.

Plate 4-3: Fishing village shoreline.
4. The ‘Poor Moral Fisher’: Local Conceptions of Environmental Degradation, Fishing and Poverty in Esperanza

The Low Status of Fishing

Many Filipinos of various occupations around the Calamianes represent their incomes as poor when compared to foreigners. Acutely aware of the large inequalities between the Philippines and developed countries, especially America, fishers frequently discuss international exchange rates. ‘One US dollar, fifty pesos!’ they would exclaim. The West in particular is perceived as a region where everyday hardships do not exist—people are able to pay for medicine to cure them when they get sick; if one can’t find work, the government pays them, and people can eat whatever they want wherever they want. Foreigners are generally perceived as having a life of unattainable luxury and leisure. This perception has important implications when it comes to dealing with tourism.

Fishers in particular, however, usually depict their occupation as earning considerably less than other occupations in the Philippines, and are very humble about their level of social status. ‘I’m just a fisherman’ (Mangingisda lang ako) was a commonly heard refrain in the time I spent in Esperanza. Fusilier fishing captain Manny, for example, told me how he trained in radio technology during the 1970s but was unable to find a job, so he became ‘just a fishing captain’.

This perception of fishing as an inferior occupation is also validated and reinforced by many other Filipinos. Many richer Filipinos view fishermen essentially as simple, poor peasants—especially Visayans, the linguistic group of most fishermen in the Calamianes. Even many richer Filipinos such as conservationists or government workers who work with fishers, and are more sympathetic towards them, still view them in a paternalistic manner. As Russell (1997) found in a coastal Tagalog community, while fishing captains may be respected figures and informal holders of power within the community, their continuing associations with manual labour, and their lack of wealth and family connections, mean that they are still regarded as having lower status in the wider society of the Philippines.¹²

In such a status-conscious country, the experience of being poor can often be degrading and humiliating. Often it is not simply the experience of living in material hardship cited as the worst thing, but the lack of dignity that comes along with this. Pinches (1991: 174) has argued, for example, that in the squatter settlement where he worked ‘what matters most to people in Tatalon is the way others attribute or deny value to them as human beings’. Poverty is thus understood as ‘the experience of not being valued as human beings’ (ibid.: 177) in addition to the lack of material wealth.

¹² In mainland Palawan, Austin (2003: 168–9) has also described a similar perception among small-scale fishermen, who feel powerless to change their lowly status in Philippine society.
When talking about their standard of living and understandings of poverty, fishers in Esperanza would usually strongly contrast the quality of life among Filipinos with that of foreigners. As foreign countries are perceived as rich decadent paradises, so the Philippines is seen as the most poverty-stricken place on Earth. ‘There is no opportunity here in the Philippines. Even though my daughter has a college degree in computer science, she cannot get a job’, one frustrated mother told me, in a version of an extremely common refrain. Getting a job overseas is highly valued and sought after among many younger residents, although out-migration among residents in Esperanza is not as common as in other regions of the Philippines.\(^\text{13}\)

At a more local scale, fishers usually equate ‘true poverty’ (mahirap na mahirap), with an extremely basic level of subsistence only. Members of these households are not able to make any investments; have no capital or savings of any sort and frequently live through debt or from day to day on what they are able to sell or catch from the sea. Some fishers of Esperanza regard themselves as belonging to this category. When I asked one fisher, Don, what he thought about poverty and his status, he stated:

> You see my house. [He lived in a nipa hut with no appliances, no electricity, and few material possessions.] I’m extremely poor. The highest income I get is ₱2000 [about US$40] in one month if I’m lucky. Some months I earn absolutely nothing and I have to go into debt. If there is a storm, I have no backup, no other option. I just wait around. I have the life of the ocean … my life is in God’s hands. But that’s life isn’t it?

Most of the fishers however, were able to state they felt they were merely ‘poor’ or ‘average’, in that they were able to save limited amounts of money at different times, and make various investments, albeit small-scale. Many fishing households explicitly expressed the goal for their children to gain a good education and thus move out of fishing. For many of these households, fishing had been an establishment strategy for the family over multiple generations, as the quote from Eder (2003: 215–6) earlier described—although the parents often continued to fish throughout their working lives, their goal was to establish themselves enough so that their children would not have to fish as well. One young man, Ricardo Calvino, was somewhat of an exception in deciding to pursue fishing as a career. His mother, Melinda was bemused at her son’s insistence:

> We were able to save up enough money through fishing to send Ricardo to finish high school and get a college degree so he didn’t have to fish for a living. Our [referring to herself and her husband Ronny, the captain of

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\(^{13}\) A few residents did leave to seek domestic work in Japan or construction work in Korea.
a commercial fresh grouper boat] hard work and success in fishing has made it possible for our children to go to college. But Ricardo decided not to go on with his education, he really likes the sea. So now he is back with Ronny, fishing. It’s strange, isn’t it? So we told him that if he wanted to keep fishing, he had to be a leader and eventually take over from Ronny as captain.

Sometimes these discussions of poverty and status take place within the context of a discussion of a household plan or economic strategy (plano) (Eder 2006). For the majority of the households I interviewed, their household plan was fairly simple: ‘just until there’ (hanggang diyan na lang). By this, they meant merely increasing their incomes slightly, through the development of their fishing activities by buying a better boat, transferring to a better fishery, and so on. For most fishers in Esperanza, their conceptions of potential economic strategies are greatly constrained by the lack of alternative economic opportunities. As such, remaining as a ‘legal fisher’ entails a life of relative poverty.

Wright pointed out the prevalence of such a view some time ago:

Knowledgeable residents decry the lot of the man employed on a local fishing boat more than that of the ‘kainginero’ [someone who practices kaingin, or shifting cultivation]. At least, they say the kaingin farmer has a measure of independence, gets something at the harvest, and can do other things on the side in the meantime. The pescador (fisherman) is a slave to his vessel, receiving his pitiful return only after the owner takes his profit and the expenses of the boat are met (Wright 1978: 124).

While not all fishers describe themselves as truly poor, they consistently represent themselves as belonging to a humble occupation. Many fishers described themselves as ‘small people’ (mga maliit). Even those fishermen who owned commercial fishing boats and were relatively well off by the standards of Esperanza would represent themselves (to foreigners like myself, to those working in Coron town or to those in Manila) as ‘just a fisher’, implying that they were poor and low in status. Importantly then, despite the range of diverse livelihood practices and levels of success described in Chapter 3, the rhetoric of the poor moral fisher is shared by fishers of all types.14

Closely linked to such representations is the perception that equates legal fishing and the experience of being poor with family. Bong, for example, said that ‘the main value in my life is my family. All my work is focused on helping my family have a better life. I have a good family so I’m very content. You see all those people in town, the rich people, they forget about their family so even though

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14 This is reminiscent of Peluso’s (1992) description of villagers uniting across class differences in an act of resistance, a theme I return to in the conclusion chapter of this book.
they’re rich they’re not as content’. Similarly, fusilier-fishing captain Mark told me that ‘even though we are a poor fishing family, we are happy. We are a happy family because we love each other, not because we are rich’. The quote by Carlos Marquez earlier in this chapter also makes a similar point, where he declares his opposition to illegal fishing in the context of caring for family and children. Here, fishing becomes solely about supporting family. In this way, legal fishing, and the poverty that goes with it, becomes moral through an identification with family—the absolute cornerstone and centre of moral life in the Philippines (Mulder 1997, 2000).

I have argued that fishing is seen as a difficult job; one that is frequently viewed as an establishment strategy or job of ‘last-resort’ as opposed to an ordinary career; it is viewed as a job of extremely low social status closely linked to financial poverty and uncertainty; and to family. Thus, legal fishing has come to symbolise the poor and humble Filipino who is so valorised in Filipino popular culture through media representations, film and events like the People Power Revolution of 1986. This valorisation relates to specifically Filipino discourses about pity, and the rights of poor people to live their lives with security and dignity. It has important implications for how fishers try to promote their livelihood practices in the face of attempts by people more powerful to curtail their livelihoods, as I detail through the rest of the book.

**Conclusion**

Fishers in Esperanza represent their practices as: harmless to the environment; legal; moral; and closely tied to poverty. Evidently, these points are valid, and I am certainly not dismissing such representations as false claims or untruths. Illegal fishing is extremely destructive to the marine environment and fishers are among the poorer sectors in Philippine society. What I have argued in this chapter, however, is that the discourse of fishers about these issues develops and exaggerates these two points, infusing them with political and cultural ideas about social relations, morality and the meanings of poverty.

This discourse of the poor moral fisher links ideas about the environment and poverty, and so I argue it is one way of understanding the poverty-environment relationship. For fishers in Esperanza, legal fishing equates with a negligible impact on the environment and a close association with poverty. It is also seen as moral, partly because of its lack of environmental impact, but also because of these links to poverty and family. Illegal fishing on the other hand, is associated with ill-gotten wealth and great damage to the environment. From this perspective, poverty is equivalent to legality and morality, whereas environmental damage is linked with immorality and wealth. Importantly, it follows that any external
interventions or regulations should focus on restricting the capacity of those who degrade the environment, while simultaneously bolstering the capacity of harmless, legal fishers to pursue their livelihood.

I have therefore tried to demonstrate how the relationship between poverty and the environment in the Calamianes must be considered from multiple perspectives, as I outlined in the first chapter. Local residents understand and express the relationship as a political one. This political nature of the discourse is reflected both in the way it highlights the injustice and immorality of the relationship, and, as I shall argue in later chapters, the strategic way in which it is deployed against conservation regulations. I have also tried to illustrate in this chapter how such claims of fishers are embedded within particular cultural understandings of poverty and morality. In the Calamianes, the relationship between poverty and the environment can be seen to be as much reflective of local discourse as of any empirical reality. The rest of the book goes on to argue how this shapes and influences the marine resource management process. Chapters 5–7 examine various aspects of this discourse related to marine resource regulation. I begin by focusing on how fishers have responded to the introduction of marine protected areas.