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India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group on Fisheries

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Why in News

Recently, the Fourth Meeting of the **India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries** was held through virtual mode.

Palk Strait and **Gulf of Mannar** are major fishing grounds for both the countries.



Key Points

- **The Fourth Meeting:**

- The two sides exchanged views on the status of **cooperation between Navy & Coast Guard** of both countries in patrolling, existing hotline between the Coast Guards and related operational matters, cooperation in **preservation of marine environment as well as the schedule for the fifth meeting of the JWG.**

Sri Lanka also sought a **safe passage for Sri Lankan fishermen to enter the Arabian Sea.**

- **India's Stand:**

- India **reiterated the need for releasing all fishing boats in Sri Lankan custody** in line with the **commitment given by the Sri Lankan President** during his state visit to India in **November 2019.**
- India highlighted the initiatives being taken under the new **Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana** and **other schemes of Government of India and governments of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry to diversify and reduce fishing pressure in the Palk Bay.**
- India also informed of **initiatives taken for diversification into deep-sea fishing** especially by fishermen of the Palk Bay area, **infrastructure** created to **facilitate deep-sea fishing**, promotion of **alternative livelihood** through **seaweed cultivation, mariculture and varieties of aquaculture activities.**

Mariculture is the **farming of marine organisms** for food and other products such as pharmaceuticals, food additives, jewelry etc.

- **Joint Working Group:**
 - India and Sri Lanka agreed to set up a **Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries** in **2016** between the **Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare of India** and **Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development of Sri Lanka** as the **mechanism to help find a permanent solution** to the fishermen issue.
 - The JWG also **includes representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Coast Guards and Navies** of both countries.
 - **Terms of reference of the JWG:**
 - Expediting the transition towards **ending the practice of bottom trawling** at the earliest.
 - **Bottom trawling** is an industrial fishing method where a large net with heavy weights is dragged across the seafloor.
 - When the weighted nets and trawl doors are dragged along the seafloor, **everything in their path is disturbed or destroyed**, including seagrasses, coral reefs or rock gardens where fish hide from predators.
 - Framing **procedures for returning fishermen** arrested by both sides.
 - Possibility of **joint patrolling**.

Fisherman Issue

- Given the **proximity of the territorial waters of both countries**, especially in the **Palk Strait** and the **Gulf of Mannar**, incidents of straying of fishermen are common.

- **Indian boats** have been fishing in the troubled waters for centuries and **had a free run of the Bay of Bengal, Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar** until 1974 and 1976 when treaties were signed between the two countries to demarcate **International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL)**.
 - However, **the treaties failed** to factor in the hardship of thousands of traditional fishermen who were forced to restrict themselves to a meagre area in



- The **small islet of Katchatheevu**, hitherto used by the Indian fishermen for sorting their catch and drying their nets, **fell on the other side of the IMBL**. Fishermen often risk their lives and cross the IMBL rather than return empty-handed, but the **Sri Lankan Navy** is on alert, and **have either arrested or destroyed fishing nets and vessels of those who have crossed the line**.
- **Steps Taken:**
 - The IMBL is **imaginary**, but it was **geo-tagged** and is visible to the fishermen, due to **Global Positioning System (GPS) sets**.
 - **Deep Sea Fishing Scheme:**
 - Promoted as **an alternative to bottom trawling by Tamil Nadu's fishermen** off the Palk Bay, the scheme envisages the provision of 2,000 deep sea fishing boats in place of trawlers by 2019-20, which will be the third and final year of implementation of the scheme.
 - It aims to put an end to disputes arising between the two countries.
 - It has been taken up under the **'Blue Revolution'** scheme.

Way Forward

- India needs to **focus more on its traditional and cultural ties** to improve relations with Sri Lanka.
- **Starting ferry services between India and Sri Lanka** can improve people to people linkages.

- **Mutual recognition of each other's concerns and interests** can improve the relationship between both countries.

Source:PIB