

Give a Man a Fish...

By Daniel Pauly

Clichés are the oil that keeps many conversations moving, and much of our thinking as well. Just like the oil used for machinery, clichés, however, do tend to harden up and to end up blocking meaningful exchanges in conversations, and even thinking.

Take for example the cliché implied in my title: “give a man a fish, and he will eat tomorrow, but teach a man how to fish, and he will have food forever”. (This is often attributed to some Chinese sage).

In the 1970s, when I first saw it, it was on the masthead of the newsletter of a charitable NGO, busy (at the time) with motorising small-scale fisheries in remote parts of Southeast Asia. This led to massive, if localised overfishing in most of the coastal areas concerned. Clearly, the sage who first came up with the idea of teaching a man to fish could obviously not anticipate the impact on coastal fish populations of a dedicated motorisation scheme.

Apples vs. Oranges....

Another cliché is that you can't compare apples with oranges. Yet it is easy to make meaningful comparisons between apples and oranges: we can compare their price, vitamin or water contents, their colour spectrum, lots of things. In fact there are even references on this topic (Downing 1991, plus a paper in the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*).

Yet, when I lecture on meta-analyses of fisheries or ecosystems, there is always somebody in the audience who says that you can't compare apples with oranges.

“For example in my country....”

Here is another annoying bit (though not a cliché): the notion that

one's country invariably produces the best counterexample to inter-countries generalisations. Thus, my students earlier often started objections to some generalisation of mine by “for example in my country...”.

Suspecting that starting a sentence this way is (often) a manner of saying: “I have not really thought about much the issue at all, but being from there, I should know better, and will thus object”. I have asked my students, in discussions, to provide examples from countries other than their own.

The results, although not yet fully tabulated, so far suggest that this approach not only enlivens conversation, but also actually encourages reading about other countries, always a good thing. In fact, the approach has been so successful that it is time to name it.

The obvious choice is to build on W. Pauli's Exclusion Principle (which states that no two electrons, protons, or neutrons in a given system can be in states characterized by the same quantum number). So let's call it D. Pauly's Exclusion Principle: when seeking to refute an inter-country comparison, use any country but your own as counterexample.

And don't say you can't compare countries, either: they are no more difficult to compare than fruits. Also: don't teach people how to fish. Teach them land-based trades, such as growing apples, or oranges.

Reference

Downing J.A. 1991. Comparing apples with oranges: methods of intersystem comparisons. p. 24-45 In: J. Cole, G. Lovett, and S. Findlay (eds.). *Comparative analysis of ecosystems*. Springer Verlag, New York.

