

An Interview with A Fishermen on Dugongs



Innaiya Thiyagaraja, a resident of Illuppakadawai, Mannar in the North of Sri Lanka, who used to go fishing at the age of 10, recalls his past episodes on hunting Dugongs with a sense of regret. When we visited Thiyagaraja at his place at Illuppakadawai, he was weaving a fish net, even though his eye sight was considerably poor. Fishing, passed down from generation to generation has become their one and only means of living. That is why even at this old age, he passes time absorbed in something connected to fishing. Thiyagaraja welcomed us with a hearty smile, made all the more charming due of the absence of teeth, while still weaving his net. Thiyagaraja was born in Sullipuram in Jaffna, but when he was about seven years

old his family moved to illuppakadawai, the place where they are still living.

He had no interest in studies, maybe due to his passion for fishing. When his parents asked him to go to school, without directly showing his disinterest to go school, he often pretended to be sick. Finally he discontinued his studies at the tender age of 10.

He recalls his childhood days at sea with a nostalgic look in his eyes. “ Unlike other children, I never feared to go to deep sea. I considered it an adventure. I wanted to tell other boys of my age how I went to the deep sea and caught fish. My first day at deep sea gave me a kind of pride instead of fear. I was just a 10 year old lad then.” He says that God wanted him to fish not study. He does not regret dropping out of school at a very young age, instead is happy that he started earning so early. “While the other boys of my age were still asking for money for their expenses from their parents, I was already earning my money and gave a part of my earnings to the family as well. When I think of that I feel proud.” He smiles.

At that time, there weren't enough resource personnel to educate them of the biology and importance of Dugongs. Fisher folks often mistook dugong to be a fish rather than a mammal that has made sea its habitat. There are incidents where they happened to catch four to five dugongs in a single day. This fact shows the abundance of dugongs in our seas back then.

Dugongs live 5 km away from the shore. Dugong schools are found mostly around rocky areas. According to Thiyagaraja, female dugongs outnumber male ones and female dugong is often seen with a baby. "Female dugong looks similar to a human female with apparent breast for lactating. The scene of lactating is aesthetic."

Though the fisher folks could see an apparent difference and a specialty between other fish and dugongs, they were ignorant of the importance of conserving them. Yet they are well aware of the life cycle of a dugong. "It does not lay eggs like fish but give birth to an infant and lactates. They give birth to one infant at a time or very rarely two. Their reproduction is not rapid like fish. They bear offspring once a year. That may be one of the reasons for their extinction," Thiyagaraja remarks. Fisher folks are also aware of the dugongs' seasonal movements. According to

Thiyagaraja, dugongs are caught mostly during the season from April to October. Usually 8-10 dugongs can be seen in a dugong school. Among them, at least 4-5 dugongs will be caught in nets.

When they caught a dugong alive, they used to put it in a nearby lagoon till a merchant comes to purchase it. "Unlike today we did not have telephone facility those days, so we did not know when a merchant would come to buy dugongs. Until a merchant comes we used to tie the dugongs we caught in the lagoon. We would sell one dugong for about hundred or less rupees. One grown dugong weighs about 250kgs and 7 to 8 feet long. The merchant would take them either to Jaffna or to Negombo to be sold."

If a merchant was not to come for a long time, Thiyagaraja says they would kill the animal and use it for their own consumption. "One person alone cannot kill a dugong. It is very heavy. Two or more people get together, lift it and drop it with great force onto the ground. When it is hit the ground so hard, it bleeds inside its head and dies. "Before we take leave from Thiyagaraja, he did not hesitate to admit his fault. "If people like you had come and educated us those days we would not have annihilated that particular animal. If someone was there to tell us the importance of dugongs, we would



have thought twice before catching them. Today at this age, being unable to go to sea, I regret my acts of wrongdoing. It is pathetic

that dugongs are going to be extinct in the country.”