

Significance of Fish in Culture of *Veddah*; The Indigenous People of Sri Lanka

Short running title; FISH IN VEDDAH CULTURE

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Archaeological excavations have disclosed the remains of nine species of freshwater fish from rock shelter sediments that confirms the consumption of fish by prehistoric man in Sri Lanka 40,000 years before now. The modern-day descendants of those earliest inhabitants or hunter-gatherers are called as ‘village veddah’ where they live in the villagers with modern infrastructure facilities such as electricity, and are limited to certain areas of the Island. The present study was carried out to obtain the ichthyologic knowledge possessed by the modern village veddah living in Rathugala and Dambana villages in the Uva Province in Sri Lanka. During an annual circle around each full moon day for 10 consecutive poya days, the research team spent 2-3 days in the Rathugala forest, observing the Village Veddha’s life style and gathering interpretations from them, from January 2010 to March 2011. Two of the veddahs; the chieftain of Rathugala village and his assistant contributed to the study. Fishing were done in two different seasons; in late June while pools are still running and connected to each other and late July, when pools are isolated. Ichthyo-toxic plant materials were used in fishing in pools while a long knife (18 inches) was used in fish cutting at the margins of wading streams. The fish caught were identified, counted and measured for their total lengths and preparation for cooking was observed. Nine species of plants are known to use for stupefying fish in pools by the Veddhas’, out of them four species were used in this study. Pools which are not isolated are not suitable for fishing according to the Veddah and therefore fishing is done only in isolated pools. During the study, total of 19 different fish species were identified and 15 vernacular names were recorded. Fishing with ichthyo-toxic plants as performed by the Veddah may not be considered as a detrimental act. Veddah’s fishing season is aligning together with drying up of the river bed where actual fishing is done at the onset of the splitting of the fish assemblage due to discontinuation of the water flow to the pool. It is disclosed that the fish who withstood the ichthyotoxicity remain till the next rain and breed and proliferate.

Keywords: ichthyologic plants, riverine habitats, traditional fishing, Veddah

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