

Fishing practices of *Veddah*: The indigenous people of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Archaeological excavations have discovered nine species of fish from rock shelters that confirm the consumption of freshwater fish by prehistoric man in Sri Lanka ca. 40,000. The descendants of those prehistoric people are known as *Veddah* and are now living in few places like Dambana, Rathugala, Pollebedda, Henebedda and Vaakare. Rathugala is located at the border of the Nilgala forest which was the traditional home-land of Rathugala-*Veddahs*. This study was undertaken in Rathugala to obtain the ichthyological knowledge possessed by *Veddah*. The chieftain of Rathugala and his assistant were the key informants. Field visits were done monthly from January 2010 to March 2011, but fishing was done in May and July using three types of ichthyotoxic plants namely *Euphorbia antiquorum*, *Randiadumetorum* and *Derris eliptica* in three places known as Rambaken Oya at Peele Kandura junction, Kimbulawala pool at Girithala Oya stream and Kabellebokka Oya stream. Cutting fish using a knife at night in Kahatapitiya Oya stream was also done. Fish caught at all the occasions were identified, counted and measured for their total lengths. Vernacular names and terms used to describe their body parts were obtained by formal questions. During the month of May when the streams were flowing, fish were not caught although ichthyotoxic materials were added but cutting by a knife was successful. However, nearly 6 kg of fish were caught in June that had 700 individuals belonging to 19 species. All the fish were edible. According to *Veddah* fishing with ichthyotoxic material is done only at the end of the dry period when the stream flow is discontinued by isolated pools. Major external features like scales, fins, tail fin and operculum had terms from *Veddah*'s language. Although ichthyotoxic materials can stupefy many individuals some of them withstand the toxicity and survive until next rainy season to sustain the fish populations. Those strong individuals are known as *Pokunarakinno*, which literally translate as protectors of the pools. *Veddah* have a culture related to fish and fishing and their knowledge is important to understand the advancement fishing technology in Sri Lankan society from prehistory to now.

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