

Socio-economic background of the sea cucumber fishery in the northwest Sri Lanka

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The sea cucumber fishery confined to the northwest, north and east coasts of Sri Lanka provides an important source of livelihood for more than 10,000 fishing families. The current study explores important socio-economic factors of sea cucumber fishers of the northwest coast of Sri Lanka. Data were collected from randomly selected 45 sea cucumber fishers using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and group discussions from January to December 2016 from major landing sites; Aanvasala, Kudawa, Sinnakudiyiruppu, Vanni mundel and Sinnappadu. The sea cucumber fishery is conducted by male fishers aged 38.3 ± 7.5 years. The majority of fishers were Christians (55%) and Islamic (40%) and 55% of them had a school education up to G.C.E. Ordinary level and $\sim 15\%$ had no school education. Mean experience level of sea cucumber collectors is around 13.0 ± 6.8 years. Each household of fisher consisted with 5.0 ± 1.6 individuals on average, among this 85% were entirely dependent on one person's income. 50% of the interviewed fishermen were full-time collectors and the rest practiced multispecies fishery. The sea cucumber fishery is a seasonal activity in this area and practiced only from September to April of each year. Full-time fishers migrate to the east coast during off season. Fishermen generally go to sea 5 ± 1 days per week during the season. As per religious backgrounds, Islam fishermen take off on Fridays while Christians on Sundays. Sea cucumber collection is mainly done during the daytime (25%), night time (15%) or both day and night (65%) based on target species with 3 ± 1 divers on-board. SCUBA diving is the major method used to collect sea cucumbers (90%) but Snorkeling (10%) is also carried out seasonally. Snorkeling is done mainly targeting *Holothuria scabra* while SCUBA divers target *Thelenota anax*, *Holothuria spinifera*, *Stichopus chloronotus* and *Bohadschia sp.* Average monthly earning of a SCUBA diver is around LKR 93,364.00 while in Skin diver it is around LKR 40,000.00. Entire sea cucumber harvest is sold out to buyers without any processing. The price of an individual is solely decided by buyers and around 57.9% of collectors are satisfied with prices they are getting. Around 84.6% of sea cucumber collectors believe that there is a decline of catch-size when compared to the past and which may affect their existence in this occupation in future. As sea cucumber fishery serves as a livelihood of many fishing families, proper management plans using depth studies of socio-economic factors must be developed to standardize this industry.

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