

Fascinating Finny Things

Posted on

Rodney J onklaas



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Sri Lankans rank high in the world. as eaters of fish. And that's true enough, but there are a good few of us who would rather watch, collect, keep and export fish-alive. The satisfaction, not to mention the hard cash, is more lasting than engulfing mouthfuls of tuna, seer, even lobsters and shrimps. Although I must confess that I like crabs swimming in curry gravy and not trying to bite off your fingers with those fearful pincers!

The pet fish business in Sri Lanka started long before a certain doctor in Kandy decided to deliver me in 1925. There are no valid records I can lay my hands on from dusty, silverfish-perforated documents. (Incidentally, 'silver fish' are rather repulsive bugs that dine on paper-no biological connection with the finny aquatic types but both are animals and must eat to live).

By the time I was 5, I had made up my mind that fish were a way of life, and so they still are, many, many years later. I have, for years, been laughed and jeered at, frowned on, sometimes threatened, in my pursuits of fish and knowledge therefrom. Fortunately there are others of the same frame of mind, and I may be one of over 50,000 Sri Lankans involved with keeping pet fish. That's a lot of people (and a good many of them are of the "Fair Sex").

Long before the last War, many enthusiasts kept pet fish, mostly imported from Europe or Singapore, and a good many bred them and made some useful pocket money. There was at least one German trader who ran a fish export/import business from his office in Canal Row, Fort. A certain Kandy surveyor whose ten-year-old son was fish-mad persuaded him to catch fish and exchange them with the German, so some foreign specimens could be obtained as barter.

So it was that angels, tiger barbs, rasboras and acaras came to Kandy and the lovely living gems from Ratnapura went to Hamburg via the German in Colombo. They went in tin cans

into which air was pumped and an attendant watched them all the time on a passenger liner.

In 1935, the 'Ceylonese ruby barb', or 'Bulatsapya' took the top award in Europe for the most outstanding new importation of that year. This superb fellow is still a leader in his field and thousands are collected and shipped out every month. He is still found in most of his former haunts, but like many other wild creatures, there are less of them these days - the price we pay for development and new human settlements. But there are also hundreds and thousands of them being bred all Over the world to satisfy an ever-growing pet market.



Goldfish in a home aquarium. (Aruna Keerthisinghe)

There are others too, from the inland streams, and they are all quite famous although not so famous as to be depicted on postage stamps and currency notes.

Then, from our lagoons, there are a few beauties which are in constant demand that cannot be bred in captivity, which means they fetch nice prices for the exporters. Chief of them is a flattened, sprightly silvery fellow we used to call the 'Ceylon Angel' but is now better known as the monodactylus. Perhaps millions have been collected, mainly in the Negombo lagoon, and shipped worldwide. Humble fishermen have become affluent, then wealthy and powerful, almost millionaires (who knows?) from the profits of mono export.

Almost as popular is another flattened fellow, adorned with dark spots on an olive-grey background with the richest of red splotches on the head region. This is the red scat, and there are never enough of them to satisfy the demand. The name scat is derived from 'Scatophagus' which, in latin, refers to their feeding habits. Scats like eating ... well...never mind! The main thing is that they sell well and the big ones are themselves quite nice to eat-if you can forget their feeding habits.

There are other lagoon fish as well which delight aquarists. Puffers who blow themselves up with water or air to register fear, outrage or defence ; the elusive and graceful archerfish who can use his snout like a water-pistol to shoot down insects ; and target perch whose body markings make one want to flex a longbow in their direction.

But it is from the sea and over coral reefs that the truly gaudy and spectacular fellows come, with pricetags to match. Hundreds of young men earn livings from the collection of marine

fishes and invertebrates by diving for them. They have been scorned and condemned by self-proclaimed protectionists and pseudo-environmentalists, but they are earning an honest living and do certainly risk their very lives in the process. From our coastal seas come lionfish, moorish idols, blue surgeons, clownfish and dozens of others who fly out regularly to bring in the foreign exchange and enthrall marine aquarists the world over.

With them are collected an amazing variety of shrimps, crabs, anemones, worms and sea-cucumbers. The invertebrate aquarium is very popular and these are the fellows used to stock it. There are crimson shrimps for which prices are paid far and above those for our famed tiger prawns and even lobsters. The daring young men who regularly descend to depths of over 100 ft. command rates of from Rs. 75 to Rs. 100 each, depending on seasonal availability. Just think of what the exporters get! Environmentalists and those deeply involved in beach-oriented tourism have expressed concern over the vanishing fish. But there are sanctuaries at Hikkaduwa and Nilaveli for the preservation of corals and coral fishes. Outside these, the food fishermen who see only cash, and not beauty in what they catch, seldom if ever bother about environment and protection. "We are the guys who need the protection," they chorus. Goggling is what they call the use of mask, snorkel and flippers to observe underwater life.

The petgoggling spots are in shallow, sheltered coralencrusted bays or over reefs. But we have monsoons, and when they rush in to create not quite the sort of conditions an average goggler can enjoy, it is time to look for other spots. And there are a number of them. If you are a dedicated, patient and curious goggler who is willing to operate in brackish lagoons where it is not that clear, there is much to see and enjoy. Choose mangroves submerged, or rocky jetties, islands, anywhere for fish and other strange fellows to take cover. Submerge gently, hold your breath as long as you can, and watch. Soon you will be detected, observed, ogled and finally accepted. If you use scuba gear it is much easier to stay down long and in water only 5 to 6 feet deep (where much of the action is); you can spend hours if you care to, just looking and studying the fish, prawns, crabs and molluscs. The nicest fellows in this brackish business are the big-eyed monos, and if you find scats, they will be standoffish for some time and then, at last, accept you. The glassfish who hang suspended in big shoals under mangroves and find safety among the stilt-roots are lovely iridescent beings with big, solemn eyes.



Kissing Gourami and Albino Fish.
(Aruna Keerthisinghe)

Deeper, you will certainly encounter mangrove snappers and, with a bit of luck, the sly and stealthy estuary perch; but these carnivores are usually impatient of man and leave for more promising launts after they have given you the once-over. If you like to, go down at night using a flashlight and you see other creatures. The large mangrove crabs are on the move and it is only wise not to meddle with them and their horrendously powerful pincers. You will see dainty prawns and shrimps mincing on the sand bottom, and they rush away backwards if they feel you are dangerous. You will also see catfish and definitely hear them, and the drums or croakers who cannot be seen in a hurry. lagoon diving is safe, warm and intriguing-even though the clarity is not crystal.

Inland diving in clear mountain streams is now the rage with several enthusiastic Sri Lankans. All over the hill country, where tiny springs become rivulets, then streams and finally rivers, there are pools, waterfalls and marvellously wooded stretches of inviting water. For the most part this is cool, clear, bracing stuff and the fish love it. You can operate in depths of from 2 to 20 ft., and just as long as you are on a level with the fish, or on 'equal terms' as we call it, they soon accept you and show a great deal of curiosity. If you want more action, simply crumble bread, boiled rice, biscuits, string-hoppers-anything that can be found in your lunch-basket-and see them eat away. One would think that the streamlined wild mahseer fingerlings eat only algae and small insect larvae (which is what the books tell you), but we have given them corned beef, rye bread, baked beans, rice and the like and nothing was left over.

One of the most spectacular and accessible spots is at Yogama, off Dehiowita, where there is one large emerald pool, and dozens of others uphill. Close by is Bopathpitiya Falls where a private holiday bungalow on a terraced slope gives you a view of those beautiful falls. At their foot, is a miniature lake, with gently moving water and all kinds of fish, pebbles and rocks, driftwood and marginal plants. It is so safe here that getting out of one's depth (unless there are midgets about) is not possible.

Off Badureliya, on the route to Adam's Peak, is a superb series of pools and waterfalls at Atweltota. Hundreds of delighted visitors have revelled in this spot, with its lush tropical forest border, rare birds and some of the friendliest little fishes ever-the dainty red rasboras.

The road to Eratne is breathtaking, in more ways than one, but buses make it there so why not you? Up in these hills are streams which yield gems and also the living ones like the fan1ed ruby barbs, their crimson heads and shoulders contrasting with the black bars.

Make a trip to Parakaduwa, which is before Ratnapura. Here are several clear streams,

magnificent rock and forest scenery and lovely, friendly people. There are several picnic spots, but if it is wet weather, be sure to avoid the grass for leeches!

Perhaps later we will write about the gentle art of Isaac Walton and other ways and means of securing fish tiffins in our shallow waters. But for starters, get to know fish better, learn to be at their levels and learn to enjoy them-alive!