Fishing Sri Lanka’s Waters

Posted on

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As dawn breaks over the City of Colombo, anglers make their way to the breakwater of the Colombo Harbour for several hours of good fishing. All along the coastline, at the estuaries caused where the many rivers, streams and canals of Sri lanka meet the sea, thousands more fishermen begin their daily task with hook, line and bait.

Also at dawn in any of the major fishing areas, such as Negombo in the North West, Aluthgama in the South West, Hambantota in the deep South, Batticaloa in the East and Jaffna and Kayts in the North, the large sailing craft of the fishermen return after a whole night’s fishing in the deep seas.

Fishing is a major source of food and commerce, as well as a quiet, profitable, satisfying pastime known to Sri lankans for many centuries. The extensive coastline and the many internal waterways such as mountain streams, wide rivers, inland reservoirs for irrigation, and the artificial canals for irrigation, transport, and drainage afford an abundance of opportunity for fishing in Sri lanka. The diversity of the prospects available has also resulted in the development of many different forms of fishing among the fishing communities and the large number of individual fishermen in the country. For many people fishing is a skill and livelihood that has come down from generation to generation, and for those living close to the beaches, rivers, lakes, canals and lagoons, fishing is second nature. It starts as a childhood game, with a few young boys going to the water with “rods” made of a string tied to a piece of stick, and a bent pin or piece of wire serving as the hook The little fishermen discover early the excitement of the catch, the wiles of the various fish, the thrill of bringing home what is to many a necessary source of nourishment, and also how to relate the tales of the ones that got away.



Those on the shore lend a hand to pull in the net with the day’s catch.

The most common form of fishing in Sri Lanka is that done by the use of rod and reel. The range of this type of necessary (equipment includes the local “bili pitta” or “kitul pitta”a rod made of the spine of the “kitul” leaf (Caryola urens), a large palm growing in plenty. The spine used as rod has good elasticity. The rod could even be a strong, supple bamboo with a nylon line tied to it. Or, it could be a piece of sophisticated equipment imported from a famous manufacturer in the West, in big demand among the richer and more leisured fishermen. With equipment handy, the

fishermen will spend their hours on the banks of rivers or streams, go out in boats , to cast in the lagoons or lakes, or go out into the sea to cast or troll. A can of worms is the most common form of bait, easily found, or readily supplied by many an urchin who make up the support staff of fishermen. But as the sophistication of the fisherman improves the bait may be smaller fish or the artificial baits such as the various “flies” used by those who go in for expensive gear: the type of bait in use generally being an indication of the income level, serious application and social level of the fisherman.

A unique form of fishing found along the coast of Weligama in the South of Sri Lanka is “stilt fishing”. A ready photo opportunity for the visitor, it is a form of fishing which requires more than the traditional patience of the fisherman. In stilt fishing, he is perched on a long stout pole driven deep into the sand in the sea, beyond the beachline. To this pole is tied a cross-stick which is the perch of the fisherman. Seated or standing on this small but strong perch, the fisherman casts into the sea round him using the traditional “kitul” rod and nylon line, or using a “yotha” which is a line wrapped around his arm. The catch is mainly of small sardines that swim in these shallow waters. On a good day one could see the stilt fishermen of Weligama working almost by automation A unique form of fishing found along the coast of Weligama in the South of Sri Lanka is “stilt fishing”. A ready photo opportunity for the visitor, it is a form of fishing which requires more than the traditional patience of the fisherman. In stilt fishing, he is perched on a long stout pole driven deep into the sand in the sea, beyond the beachline. To this pole is tied a cross-stick which is the perch of the fisherman. Seated or standing on this small but strong perch, the fisherman casts into the sea round him using the traditional “kitul” rod and nylon line, or using a “yotha” which is a line wrapped around his arm. The catch is mainly of small sardines that swim in these shallow waters. On a good day one could see the stilt fishermen of Weligama working almost by automation The sight of a lone fisherman casting a small net into the water is common in the city and suburbs, as much as in the vast rural outback of Sri Lanka. The net would be cast from the bank and then drawn in, or in shallow waters the fisherman would wade out-waist deep into the water and fish for several hours. In the lagoons, lakes and reservoirs the fisherman with his net would go out in a small dug-out canoe or on a small craft made by lashing several bamboos together. A quaint form of fishing developed by Sri lankan fishermen who live by the lagoons is their method for the catching of prawns. The fisherman makes a basket-like enclosure of bamboo or stout reed. This is placed in the water, with two-thirds being below the water level. At dusk a small lamp or flame is lit and affixed to the top of the basket or “kotuwa” that attracts the

prawns, which are then entrapped in the basket.

Prawns and shrimps are also caught in the deep sea during the monsoon seasons. The method adopted here is to tie two bamboos to the end of the boat, which is ,usually a motorized sailing craft. A large net is tied to the bamboos and one end lowered into the water. The boat then trolls the net and the prawns and shrimp found in abundance during the season are caught in it. In the larger fishing communities the fishermen go out to sea in boats.

The traditional sailing craft are fast being replaced with those using outboard motors. The journey into the sea usually takes place at dusk for almost a whole night or more of fishing. A person going out to the beach along most of Sri lanka’s coastline shortly after sunset will not miss seeing the flickering lights of the kerosene lamps of the hundreds of fishing craft out at sea. 1be boats go out to a distance of about 10 miles and fish with the use of heavy nets. Often there is the use of “ma-de!” (great nets) where the fishing crafts will go out to sea and lay the net in a sweeping arc, to be drawn in by men on shore. When a “ma-dela” is being drawn, it is still the custom in Sri lanka for everyone in the vicinity to give a helping hand in drawing the net. 1be traditional reward is a fish or two from the catch. There are also many fishermen who go out to sea and cast with a hand-held line.

Trolling, which is mainly done for sport, is increasing in popularity in Sri Lanka. Here fishing enthusiasts go out to sea in hired mechanized boats. 1bey go as far as 12 to 20 miles and fish with rod and reel and the special gear that is now available to the sports fisherman. Trolling is known to ensure a big catch, unlike the small takes usually available at the estuaries and the breakwater. A vast area of sea is covered in a single trolling trip. 1be boatmen who take the trailers out will also guide them to places where the catch is best. Those who intend going deep into the sea should set out by about 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning to be able to get to good fishing grounds early. 1be boats used for trolling are usually 4 tonners with inboard motors of 28 to 32 hp, which travel at maximum speeds of 3 to 4 knots. A few tips to the fisherman: Fishing off the breakwater in Colombo is best between October and May. 1bis is a known haven of the “Gentlemen Fishermen”. A permit is required for breakwater fishing. 1bis should be obtained from the Sri lanka Ports Authority or through the Ceylon Anglers’ Club. There is good fishing at the Colombo Breakwater and at the many estuaries situated within 25 miles of Colombo. 1be best time is either dawn or the evening, just before sundown. With luck there is every opportunity to hook a paraw (trevally), seer (Spanish mackerel), jeela (barracuda) or a modha (estuary perch)-all of which are delicacies among Sri Lankans.



A fisherman casts his net.