

Chai Fishing in the Meghna River of Bangladesh: Now Arising the Question of Threatening of Yellowtail Catfish (*Pangasius pangasius*; Hamilton, 1822) in Nature

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Introduction

Yellowtail catfish is carnivorous and voracious inhabit and occurs in the freshwater tidal zone as juveniles, moves toward brackish water as sub-adults and finally as adults to river mouths and inshore areas (Rainboth, 1996) and during breeding season fry is notably found mostly in the Meghna River, most of which are locally exploited for consumption, having a great demand as a most commercially important riverine catfish which is listed as a critically threatened species by IUCN Bangladesh, 2003. This fish is decline showing reasons of overexploitation, destruction of habitat and breeding ground by imposing numerous fishing activities. Among these, Chai fishing is one of the most influential types to have the indiscriminate killing of natural fish (especially from fry to juvenile) and this practice started from Munshigonj district. In recent, fishers of the Chandpur and Shariotpur region have already adapted to this fishing followed by the fishers of the whole freshwater tidal zone of Meghna River.

Description

There are three types (small, medium and large) of Chai available in the freshwater tidal zone of the Meghna River. Chai making is not an easy job, mainly skill people hired from Munshigonj District. The labour charge of a skilled person is 600 Tk/day and call for 8 - 10 days for making one chai. In the meantime, locally few people grow their sciences in making chai. Locally available bamboo is used as the primary material for making chai. The length (72 - 108 inches), width (50 - 54 inches) and middle circumference (216 - 252 inches) while the first edge circumference (144 - 180 inches) used for men entrance to supply feed and to collect trapped fish beside the opposite edge (180 - 210 inches) used for the way of entering fish through two mouths which have diameter 8 - 10 and 3 - 4 inches respectively. The mesh size of chai is 1.5 cm with average longevity is approximately two months. About 8000 - 12000 Tk is needed for making one chai. Additionally, a boat is essential for Chai fishing in where 5 - 7 fishers are engaged: one Head Mazhi (team leader) and others labour fishers. Every year chai fishing season starts from April to May. A great number of Nomad fishers group present in Chandpur usually practiced longline fishing in the Meghna River. Their catch availability implies that *P. pangasius* fry is abundant in the river. They are acting as an indicator of chai fishers. When the Nomad fishers get started *Pangasius* fry in longline fishing, then the chai fishers are ready to get down for fishing. Chai fisher used different types of feed ingredients which are locally available like dry fish (especially, sidol shutki; Native punti, *Puntius sp.*), chira, sugar, mustard oil cake, boiled potato, coconut oil cake, rice bran, wheat bran, bread, molasses and various spicy as lure for fishing. The fishers supply 25 - 30 kg feed in each chai; the compositions are 3 - 4 kg dry fish (sidol sutki), 4 kg boil potato, 1 kgsugar/ molasses, 2 kg chira/bread, 15 - 20 kg mustard oil cake and add a variety of spicy that expenditures about 3000 Tk. Fishers usually carried out the minor repairs to the chai and the whole food arrangement process for fishing places in the chai on the boat.

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Before one hour at high tide Chai has been fixed underwater in the depth of 80 - 120 feet by tying a long rope while the opposite edge of the rope tied with plastic gallon as identification float. Hanging weight (120 - 160 kg stone/ anchor) on the opposite side of chai by a long rope (105 inches) as a buoyant object to prevent washing away with the tide and move according to tidal movement. There has a risk for chai fishers because sometimes Hilsa (*Tenualosa ilisha*) fishers pull their identification float when their nets are complicating with chai identification float to misapprehend during netting. In these circumstances, chai fishers failed to trace out their chai in the river. In the case of more experienced Mazhi there is no need to tie identification float, they guess chai location by their proficiency. Fishers wait for 12 - 15 hours after settling the chai in the river and in that interim they usually get more than 100 kg pangas fish (from fry to juvenile) having of weight 30 - 40g and length 12 - 18 cm in each catch by one chai, which now arises the question of threatening of this species from nature. Each kilogram is selling for 150 - 200 Tk which is locally called Gang tengra (*Gagata youssoufi*; Ataur Rahman, 1976) reported from local fishers. At the same time, chai fisher caught Rita fish (each having wt. of of 300 - 400g) by using small crushing snail mixed with mud to make a paste-like ball for feed and sell for 400 - 500 Tk/Kg.

Conclusion

Because of this tendency, natural fry is declining day by day. Available catch suggests that this species is indeed overexploited resulting in inferring population declines. Because of Chai fishing, *Pangasius* species are now in danger, in that fishing fry to juveniles are trapped and damaged due to improper handling, the unavailability of seeds hindered the commercial culture of high priced Yellowtail catfish until now. Therefore, restraining such destruction and the introduction of these natural seeds in ponds has ample potentials for production and conservation. Government should take proper steps to conserve natural Pangus fry at nursery ground and ban chai fishing (April-May) by providing the alternative livelihood option of the Chai fishers, it will possible to protect Pangus in Nature. Moreover, government as well as people from all walks of life should come forward to protect that commercial fish by building mass awareness.



Figure : A typical chai.

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