

Strong El Nino may sweep away oil sardines off Kerala coast this year

The strengthening El Nino is likely to cause a dent in the Indian oil sardine stock along the Kerala coast, leading to a substantial drop in the catch in the coming years.

EM Abdussamad, Principal Scientist at the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, said El Nino has been seriously influencing the growth and reproduction of oil sardine resources and it has been noted that sardine used to migrate from Kerala waters to other coasts during the El Nino years.

The Indian oil sardine is a sensitive pelagic fish whose biological cycle will easily be upset even due to slight differences in ocean ecosystem. The impact of El Nino is more evident along the Kerala coast than other areas of the country. Hence, the fluctuation in oil sardine catch is always high along the south-west coast, he said.

Growth retardation

According to Abdussamad, oil sardine in Kerala coast had suffered growth retardation and spawning failure in 2015 and 2016 due to El Nino. “What is more alarming now is that El Nino has struck again before the resource recovered from biological stress like spawning failure in full scale, which is likely to cause further troubles to the sardine stock in Kerala”, he said.

The Climate Prediction Centre of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), an international agency focussing on the conditions of the oceans, warned in December last year that the El Nino is expected to strengthen during the coming seasons. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the India Meteorological Department (IMD) also stated that 2018 was an evolving El Nino year and that 2019 may be warmer due to El Nino and global warming.

Sharp decline

Although a record catch of nearly four lakh tonnes of oil sardine was registered in the State in 2012, a gradual decrease was recorded in the following years owing to the development of El Nino. A sharp decline to about 46,000 tonnes was recorded in 2016 following a strong El Nino in 2015. With the intensity of the El Nino decreased, the sardine catch registered an increase in 2017.

A book with detailed analysis and latest findings about oil sardine prepared by the CMFRI will be released soon, he said.