

Sharp decline of oil sardine in Kerala, says CMFRI

Kochi, Jul 5 (PTI) Catch of oil sardine, a tasty and favourite variety of marine fish integral to Kerala cuisine, has drastically decreased to a meagre 3,297 tonnes in the southern state last year, according to the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI). “Compared to the previous year, 2021 experienced a drop of 75 per cent in the sardine catch across the Kerala coast. This was the lowest catch of the fish after 1994 in the state. Again, this was 98 percent lower than the annual average of sardine availability during 1995-2020 which is 1.66 lakh tonne,” the central institute said in the finding presented at a workshop held at its headquarters here.

However, Kerala recorded 5.55 lakh tonne of total marine catch in 2021 registering an increase of 54 per cent compared to the COVID-hit 2020 in which it was 3.6 lakh tonne, CMFRI said in the workshop participated by the representatives of various fishers’ organisations.

Lesser sardine (65,326 tonne) topped the list of the most landed resources in the state in 2021, followed by Indian mackerel (56,029 tonne) and scads (53,525 tonne). Even as oil sardine, silver bellies and black pomfret decreased, penaeid prawns, squid and threadfin breams increased significantly during the year, said Dr T M Najmudeen while presenting the findings.

Small-scale fishers bear the brunt of dwindling catch of sardine. Kerala’s marine fisheries sector suffered a severe loss owing to the steep decline in the catch of oil sardine, showed another CMFRI study that was presented at the workshop.

The annual value of the sardine in the landing centres dropped to Rs 30 crore from that of Rs 608 crore in 2014, incurring a loss of Rs 578 crore to the sector, said Dr N Aswathy, Principal Scientist of CMFRI, who led the study. The small-scale fishermen who venture into the sea on outboard ring seines bore the brunt of the dwindling catch of the sardine as they primarily depended upon this fish for livelihood. Even as many other fish resources showed an increase in the landings, the annual income of this group of fishers was reduced to Rs 90,262 in 2021 from that of Rs 3.35 lakh, she said.

Meanwhile, the workshop has called for strict measures to curb juvenile fishing as it causes severe loss to the marine fisheries sector. Speaking at the meet, fishery experts warned that juvenile fishing practices would result in economic loss and resource depletion as well. Citing CMFRI’s study, Najmudeen pointed out that 31 per cent of threadfin breams (Kilimeen) caught from the Kerala coast last year were juveniles. “This alone has incurred a loss of Rs 74 crore to the sector,” he said, adding that implementation of the Minimum Legal Size (MLS) had a significant impact in the sector.

President of Matsyathozhilali Aikya Vedi Charles George, who presided over the function, said fishermen across the state were in deep crisis owing to steep hikes in fuel prices and dwindling catch of commercially important fishes, especially the Indian oil sardine. “In order to support the fishermen families, special famine packages or subsidies should be provided to them,” he said. Fishermen should stay away from juvenile fishing as it would only add to deepen their crisis in a way that the practice might badly affect the sustainability of the resources, George added. The workshop also called for uniform implementation of the MLS regulations across the coastal states of the country. The marine fisheries sector is also plagued by climate change, pollution and plastic litter among other reasons, the workshop observed.