

Prawn or shrimp? Resolving the question

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The confusion in the usage of terms “prawn” and “shrimp” is existing since a long time among the common people as well as the scientific community. It is hard to differentiate between these two based on their size, habitat, texture, nutritional value etc. as there are no existing standards to classify these two into separate groups. In reality, both the terms are widely and similarly used in all arenas of fisheries whether it is capture, culture, post-harvest or in the trade and do not have any particular scientific basis.

When we look into the etymology of the term “prawn”, it was first applied in early 1400s as various Middle English forms prayne, prane, praune, and prawne, which present no clear cognates in languages other than English. It looks as though for at least six hundred years seamen have used the word pran- ~ parn- denoting “prawn”. It is not clear where the term “prawn” originated, but early forms of the word surfaced in England in the early 15th century as prayne, praine and prane. Its origin remains unknown, but it hardly goes back to Old English or Old French and may be dealing with an obscure Mediterranean term, ultimately traceable to some substrate language of that area (Etymology posts by Anatoly Liberman, 2012). The term “shrimp” and seems to have originated around the 14th century with the Middle English shrimpe, akin to the Middle Low German schrempen, and meaning to contract or wrinkle; and the Old Norse skorpn, meaning to shrivel up, or skreppa, meaning a thin person (Wikipedia).

The terms “shrimp” and “prawn” are not related to any known taxonomic group. Although the term “shrimp” is applied to smaller species, and “prawn” to larger forms, there is no clear distinction between both terms

and their usages, often confused or reverse in different countries or region (Chan, 1998). For instance, in North America, the term “shrimp” is used much more frequently, while the word “prawn” is most often used to describe larger species or those fished from fresh water. While in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland, “prawn” is the general term used to describe both true prawns and shrimps (Holthuis, 1980). Richardson & Yaldwyn (1958) stated that “shrimp” and “prawn” are names of unknown origin and of no strict zoological reference in New Zealand. There in common usage, “shrimp” are small, some three inches or less in length, taken for food by netting, usually from shallow water. “Prawn” are larger, up to twelve inches long, taken by trapping and trawling.

The erstwhile Crustacean Fisheries Division of ICAR-CMFRI right from its commencement decided to use the term “prawn”, based on the decision taken at the Prawn Symposium held in connection with the Sixth Session of Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council (IPFC) held in Tokyo in 1955. In this report it is highlighted that the term “prawn” should be applied to the Penaeids, Pandalids and Palaemonids, while the term “shrimp” should be restricted to the smaller forms belonging to the other families. Later, in 2011, during a national workshop on taxonomy of Indian commercial prawns during 14-19th February, at ICAR-CMFRI, Kochi, based on detailed discussion on this topic the forum took the unanimous decision to continue usage of prawn in all the publications (Handbook of prawns–Radhakrishnan *et al.*, 2011 and Handbook of Marine prawns of India – Rao *et al.*, 2013) from the division. It is also good to

analyse, in the course of time how the usage of shrimp has adapted in to our system. The term “shrimp” gradually got established with the commencement of export of Indian prawns to United States, as it was essential to follow the buyer’s preference in the labels. They prefer to use “shrimp” rather than “prawn” and as US was the major importer of Indian prawns, this term become popular in export market.

The other reason is related with the scientific publications. In this context also, US based journals/ publications are insisting authors to use “shrimp” in their research papers

and so the usage of shrimp become inevitable for the acceptance of research papers. These two issues mainly forced the stakeholders to use “shrimp”, otherwise there is no taxonomic or scientific evidence to change to “shrimp” from the regular use of “prawn”. As these two terminologies are synonymous we may continue the usage of both, and while publishing the author can appropriately include a disclaimer/ note about the usage of the term. Hence, scientists in the former Crustacean Fisheries Division decided to use the term “prawn”, except wherever, the usage of “shrimp” is obligatory.