

## **Fishmeal industry could tap into pearly hairtail stock, say scientists**

Scientists at the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) have recommended tapping ribbon fish variety pearly hairtails, a non-conventional deep-sea resource found in the south-eastern Arabian Sea, for the reduction industry (fishmeal production).

“Pearly hairtails, encountered between 200- and 600-metre depth, have found enthusiastic acceptance from the fishmeal industry”, said a paper published by CMFRI scientists recently.

The considerably huge assemblage of pearly hairtails offers a potential opportunity to deep-sea trawlers to diversify catch to improve returns in the midst of problems such as increased fuel cost, said the paper. At the same time, catching the non-conventional resource can considerably reduce the dependence of fishmeal factories, which now resort to using juveniles of commercially important conventional resources.

While pearly hairtails are edible, they are too small and present a cumbersome process for human consumption. It is suited to the Surimi industry and fishmeal sectors even as trawlers had in the past targeted non-conventional resources such as lantern fish, unicorn leather jacket, smooth bass, and red-toothed trigger fish.

The paper from CMFRI scientists, lead authored by Abdussamad E.M., said deep-sea trawlers from Kerala’s southern districts, targeting shrimps and cephalopods, had reported catching pearly hairtails on their return trips to enhance earnings. The fish variety has not been consistently targeted as a commercial variety as it is found in deeper areas beyond the conventional fishing grounds of territorial waters.

Their small size has triggered a lack of demand from commercial users, and trawlers have refrained from catching them consistently. But the demand for non-conventional varieties from fish meal factories can change the scenario now.

The paper said the most abundant ground had been found to be the continental slopes off Thiruvananthapuram and Kanyakumari districts at depths ranging between 300 and 600 metres. The fish variety has been found to be migratory. But the catch rate has been encouraging at seven to 10 tonnes a haul. Though initially only trawlers from Kerala looked to utilising the resource, trawlers from neighbouring Tamil Nadu and Karnataka too have begun to fish for pearly hairtails.

The paper said a tentative estimate using different sources of information indicated a catch of more than four lakh tonnes of pearly hairtails from October 2022 to February 2023. The paper also underscored the need for conducting detailed biological ecosystem studies to suggest a sustainable management plan for the resource.