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## BARRACUDAS\*

The barracudas, otherwise known as sea-pikes of the family Sphyraenidae, are caught in sizeable quantities along the Indian coast. They are reported to occur in all tropical waters. Of the four distinct species reported from the Indo-Pacific region viz., *Sphyraena barracuda* (Walbaum), *S. jello* Cuvier, *S. forsteri* Cuvier and *S. obtusata* Cuvier (Fig. 1), the former two

species attain more than 1.5 m in length whereas others grow to a maximum of 40–60 cm, the common size range being 20–30 cm (Fischer and Whitehead, 1974. *Species identification sheets for fishery purposes IV. F.A.O. Rome*).

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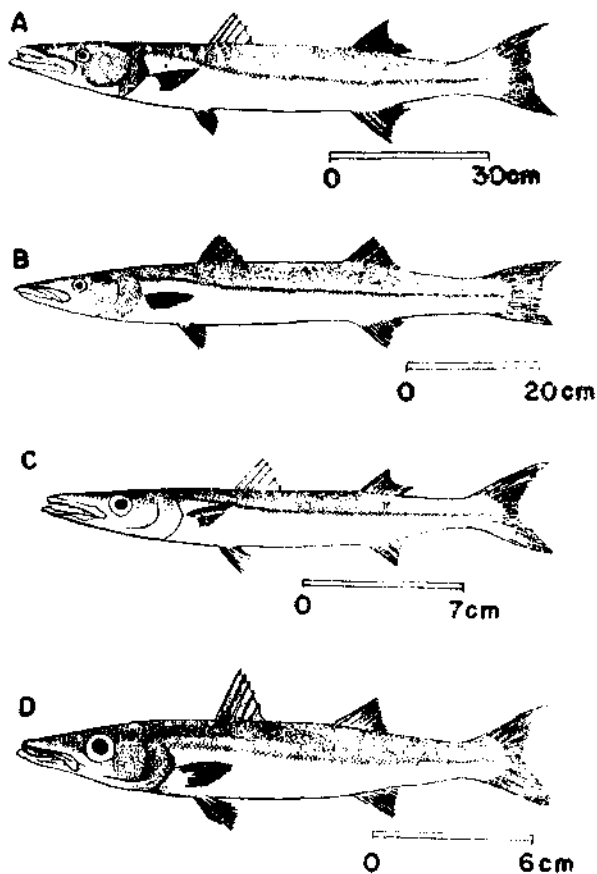


Fig. 1. Common species of barracudas—A. *Sphyræna barracuda* (Walbaum), B. *S. jello* Cuvier, C. *S. forsteri* Cuvier, D. *S. obtusata* Cuvier.

The barracudas possess an elongated and sub cylindrical body with small cycloid scales. Head is long with a projecting lower jaw and a horizontal cleft of mouth. They draw unusual interest because of their sharp teeth which are large, unequal, fang-like and implanted in sockets in both jaws and palatines. Two widely separated dorsal fins, the first with five strong spines and the second originating opposite to ventral are characteristic of these fishes.

They are pelagic in habitat and are caught at varying depths from the surface down upto 40 m. Though they are shoaling species the large individuals are solitary. Due to the swift swimming efficiency they are highly predatory in nature feeding voraciously on other pelagic fishes. It is said that when a group of barracuda have eaten enough, it herds the rest of the shoal it is attacking into shallow water and keeps guard over it so as to consume them at leisure. Large barracudas

are said to be most ferocious among predatory fishes. They are dreaded by fishermen in tropical and sub-tropical seas due to their alleged attack on human beings.

Ovarian development indicates that barracudas may spawn more than once each season. The number of eggs released increase with age and size, ranging from an estimated 42,000 for a first spawning to over 484,000 for older fish. In four days after hatching, the larvae begin to assume adult morphological characteristics, particularly the lower jaw and are capable of feeding.

The barracudas figured prominently in the development of purse seine fishery and were the object of an International Fisheries Commission study along the Californian waters. In order to manage the barracuda resources, the California Department of Fish and Game has even recommended to initiate action to prohibit the landings of any barracuda under 70 cm in total length in both sport and commercial fisheries.

An estimated 16,662 tonnes of barracudas were landed from the entire Indo-Pacific region during 1972. During the period 1969-'80, the maximum landings of barracudas (4,862 tonnes) from the Indian waters were recorded in 1974 (Fig. 2). Out of an estimated landings of 2,265 tonnes in 1979, Tamilnadu contributed

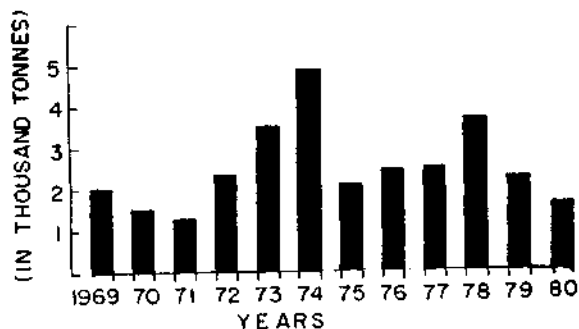


Fig. 2. Annual landings of barracudas in India from 1969 to 1980.

the maximum (1,463 tonnes) followed by Kerala (477 tonnes). Most of the larger species are caught in hooks and lines, bottom-set gill nets and drift gill nets while sizeable quantities of smaller varieties are caught by trawlers from the inshore waters along the Indian coast. The large varieties are in good demand due to their delicate flesh and are marketed in fresh conditions.

