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BLACK KINGFISHES*

Rachycentron canadus (Linnaeus) (= *Eleate nigra*) popularly called black kingfish is the only representative of the family, Rachycentridae. It is also known as cobia, surgeon fish and lemonfish. It is reported to occur in all the warm seas except along the coasts off southern Australia in the Indo-Pacific area and the Pacific coast of North America and is rarely reported along the Japanese coast. These fishes are pelagic in nature and prefer largely the open seas, but are also recorded in shallow coral reefs and rocky shores. Occasionally they are reported to lurk near pilings, wrecks, buoys or other objects, stationary or floating.

These fishes possess an elongate sub-cylindrical body with a broad and depressed head (Fig. 1). The first dorsal fin is represented by 7-9 short strong isolated spines without any connecting membrane and are depressible into a groove. Caudal fin is rounded in juveniles whereas it changes to lunate form with a prolonged upper lobe in adults. The basic colour is dark brown and sometimes dark green along back, with two narrow black bands along the sides. Young specimens will have one or two sharply defined narrow silvery bands along the sides. These fishes were formerly grouped with remoras or sucker-fishes due to their external resemblances, but the osteological studies by Gill and Tate Regan established its close relation with Carangidae (Weber and de Beaufort 1931, *Fishes of the Indo-Australian Archipelago, VI Leiden*).

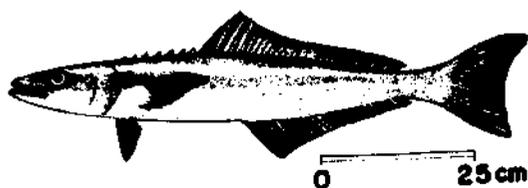


Fig. 1. The Black kingfish, *Rachycentron canadus* (Linnaeus)

The black kingfishes attain over 1.5 m in length with an average of 80-100 cm. Sometimes they travel in small shoals, but generally they appear solitarily. This slender and streamlined species with their fast swimming power are fine sporting fishes. Detailed studies on the biology of kingfishes are lacking. They mainly feed on crabs, squids and fishes.

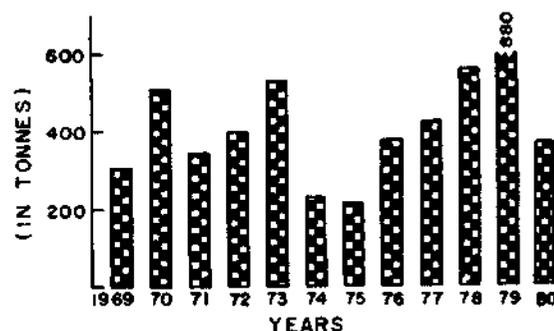


Fig. 2. Annual landings of black kingfishes in India from 1969 to 1980.

The landings of *R. canadus* along the Indian coast during the period, 1969-'80 show wide fluctuations. A steady increase in the catches were noted from 1975 onwards, the maximum landings being 880 tonnes recorded in 1979 (Fig. 2). With an estimated average catch of 438 tonnes per year Tamilnadu accounted for the maximum followed by Kerala. Being an excellent table fish they are in high demand and are marketed in fresh condition.

They are landed predominantly by drift gill nets, hand lines and troll lines mainly from the inshore waters along the Indian coast. In some countries they are also caught by artificial baits but generally taken on hooks with crabs or fishes as baits.

*Prepared by P. K. Mahadevan Pillai.

