

NIGHT FISHING FOR OCEANIC TUNAS AT VISAKHAPATNAM

Tunas comprising of several genera and species are emerging as an important pelagic resource of Visakhapatnam. Of the several species contributing to the tuna fishery of the region, the yellow fin tuna (*Thunnus albacares*) forms the major component of the catch. Tunas have been exploited along the Visakhapatnam coast since the past several years. Interestingly, they are mainly harvested by non-mechanized crafts operating the hooks and lines. The local fishermen especially residing at Lawsons Bay and Pudimadaka villages travel out to the oceanic waters with ease in their small crafts and are skilled to catch large sized yellowfin tuna and billfishes. However, this year onwards night fishing for tunas has commenced from November. The availability of large sized yellowfin tuna off Andhra coast coupled with high demand by exporters and better returns for the fishermen, have induced the fishermen of these villages to venture out into the sea during night hours in their small sparsely equipped crafts.

Wooden catamarans consisting of two pieces of logs strapped together is the most popular craft used in tuna fishing. Of late fibre crafts too are being used in this fishery. The fibre crafts have been shaped to look like a catamaran when the logs have been strapped together.

The crafts use wind power for propulsion and huge sails are mounted on the crafts. When the wind is favourable, the crafts are able to reach the fishing grounds, located at about 14-15 km away from the shore, in 3 h. When the wind is not favourable, the fishermen use oars to steer the crafts and then it takes nearly 5-6 h to reach the fishing grounds. Of late a few units operating the hook and line, especially at Pudimadaka, are fitted with outboard engines for propulsion.

However, even these units have sails and use engines only if wind conditions are not favourable. The crew consists of 3 to 6 members. They start out for fishing early in the morning by 0300 h and try to return by 1700 h or they sail out late in the evening and return by early morning. However, time of return after fishing changes as per the prevailing wind conditions. If wind conditions are not at all favourable, fishing activity is suspended for the day. Fishing is carried out throughout the year except when there is a cyclone warning and when inclement weather conditions prevail. However, peak landing is during October-March when targeted

fishing especially for yellowfins is carried out by all crafts at Pudimadaka and Lawsons Bay. Catch at Visakhapatnam generally consists of the yellow fin, *Thunnus albacares* (80%), Skipjack tuna, *Katsuwonus pelamis* (15%) and the little tunny, *Euthynnus affinis* (5%). Other tuna species are generally not observed in the hook and line fishery here. During peak season 15 -20 t of yellowfin tuna are landed by these crafts everyday. Yellowfin tuna and billfishes are caught only at depths greater than 250 m depths. The smaller tunas are caught at about 60 m.

The catch is not even iced. The fish is just kept on the deck and brought ashore in that condition. But a part of this catch too is exported depending on the quality of the fish landed. Once the catch reaches the shore, middlemen who have loaned advances to the fishermen take charge of the catch. The middlemen generally take only yellowfin tuna and at times billfishes. The processors have their own quality testers who tests and certifies the quality of the fish. The fishes are then graded as first

(Contd...)



A part of the tuna catch



Fishers returning with the catch



Transportation of the catch

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quality (sashimi grade), second or third grade which is again exported but not as sashimi grade. The ungraded fishes are sent to domestic markets either for consumption in fresh condition or to be canned. The graded fishes are gutted and chilled and sent to Chennai for export. The remaining catch is iced and sent to domestic markets in Kerala where the tuna meat is in good demand or sent for preparation of canned meat. The tuna fishery along Andhra Pradesh is thus attaining the status of a large industry with the involvement of fishermen, purchasers and exporters.

(Article contributed by Dr. (Mrs) Pratibha Rohit, Senior Scientist, PFD)