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'State's annual fish catch in 2019 was the lowest in 45 years'

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MUMBAI: The state witnessed its lowest annual fish catch in 45 years in 2019 at 2.01 lakh tons, with a rapid decline in all major fish species being caught, the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) said.

The environmental factors such as extreme weather events (heavy rain), five tropical cyclones, weather depressions in the Arabian Sea, and juvenile overfishing are said to be the reasons for 36% drop in a number of fishing days in 2019.

"Due to extended rainfall beyond monsoon and extreme weather events including cyclones, total fishing hours along the Maharashtra coast reduced drastically, especially between August and December as compared to rest of the year," said Anulekshmi Chellappan, scientist-in-charge, CMFRI Mumbai.

"Owing to low fish catch many fishers did not venture into the sea at all, due to non-profitable operations. Combined with this, over-exploitation of fish stocks due to high juvenile by-catch, which continued unabated similar to previous years, further worsened fish landing numbers," said Chellapan.

The institute released its report on the Annual Marine Fish Landings in India for 2019 on Tuesday that identified a 32% decline from 2018 (2.95 lakh tons) for Maharashtra. In 2017 it was 3.81 lakh tons and 2.92 lakh tons in 2016. However, prior to 2019, the historical trend indicated a similar situation in 1974 when fish catch dropped to 1.8 lakh tons.

Experts said CMFRI may be accurate. "The number of 2019

MUM IS A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR

Maharashtra contributed 5.6% of the country's fish resources to the nation. The state ranked seventh among 10 coastal states and union territories while Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Kerala led the top rankings.

Mumbai was the major contributor of fish catch for the state accounting for 40%. Of the tally of fishing boats in the state, 87.4% are mechanised, 12.4% motorised, and 0.2% non-motorised.

Arabian Sea cyclones were unusually high equalling a 117-year-old record. Rising sea surface temperatures may affect fish forcing them to migrate to cooler waters. However, in the process, changing habitats may not be favourable for growth or reproduction leading to mortality," said Dr Roxy Mathew Koll, senior scientist, Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune.

Maharashtra was identified as one of the leading states for post-harvest fish losses by CMFRI. "Whatever brought from the sea is a national resource and it cannot be allowed to be simply wasted. Its national food waste," said Chellapan.

The state fisheries department said they were concerned about the findings. "Climate change impacts are affecting the fisheries sector. However, we have taken all steps to curb overfishing by issuing advisories to avoid catching juveniles and reducing harmful fishing practices as much as possible," said Rajendra Jadhav, joint commissioner (fisheries).