

## Fishers encounter yet another trouble in pufferfish

*The species causes extensive damage to the gear, ripping off large portions of the net. It bites other catch, bringing down their value drastically. Fishers say it is akin to wild animal attacks faced by farmers, but they do not get compensated*

Fishing with partially damaged gear is a huge gamble, yet Lawrence and his mates are forced to take the desperate trip. The nylon webbing of their ring seine was ripped in a pufferfish attack and the fishers say they have been noticing a proliferation of the species of late. Locally known as ‘petha’ and ‘kadal makkri’, the annual pufferfish landings in the State show fluctuations as it had hit 747 tonnes in 2013 and dipped to 188 tonnes by 2016.



Apart from causing extensive damage to their gear, pufferfish bites reduce the market value of the target catch doubling the loss for fishers. “Though it’s an annual affair, we are seeing an increased infestation this season. It’s similar to the wild animal menace faced by farmers, but we hardly get any compensation. We cannot afford to replace or to properly repair the gear and now we are using a net with random gaps tied together. We have approached the Fisheries department, but we don’t have much hope,” says the fisher.

While there are nets in varying lengths and weights, the loss depends on the size and area of damage. “If the damage is limited, we can replace a few kilos of the net, but often nets are rendered completely useless with no option to salvage it. Transporting the net to mending yard is not easy as it takes around 20 labourers to carry the net to the vehicle. Mending charge per day is above ₹1,000 and the work can take more than a week’s time. It also means the loss of working days,” says Robins, a fisher from Kochi.

### **Trawlers’ complaint**

While trawlers are least affected by the loss of gear and pufferfish is now bought by fish meal fish oil (FMFO) industry, they too suffer losses. “Inside the net it attacks other fish with high commercial value and then the catch cannot be exported. We will have to sell squid and cuttlefish for a very low price at the local market. Around 60% of the real catch gets damaged due to puffer attacks these days and it fetches only 25% of the market price. This season we have noticed a rise in the menace caused by both pufferfish and jellyfish,” says Peter Mathias, president of All Kerala Fishing Boat Operators Association.

### **Predators perish**

An earlier study conducted by Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute points towards ‘trophic cascade’ or a dip in the density of top predators leading to a proliferation of the prey species. “Around 10 years ago, we had identified a decline in the population of some of the major predators of pufferfish including kingfish, catfish and sharks, but it need not be the reason for the current increase in puffer biomass. But it all indicates that the marine ecosystem has suffered some serious damages and it has affected the species composition. In 2019, massive landings of triggerfish were reported from various parts of Kerala and these cases should not be analysed in isolation,” says Sunil K. Mohammed, former principal scientist, CMFRI.