

Emerging fishery of Unicorn leatherjacket along Chennai coast

S. Gomathy*, Shoba Joe Kizhakudan and T. Balaraman

Madras Regional Station of ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Chennai-600 028, Tamil Nadu

*E-mail: gomathycmfri@gmail.com

Unicorn leatherjackets (*Aluterus monoceros*) (Family Monacanthidae) are locally known as "Seruppumeen" in Tamil due to their highly compressed body, rough, thick sandpaper like skin and human footwear like appearance. In

Kasimedu landing centre (Chennai) the unicorn leatherjackets were usually landed in negligible quantity along with other fishes. They had least importance in the fishery, considered unpalatable and thrown away as trash fish.



Unicorn leatherjacket *Aluterus monoceros* (Linnaeus, 1758)

Recently, during the months of August – September 2023, an unusually heavy landing of leatherjackets was observed in Kasimedu fish landing centre. On an average each trawler brought 4 to 5 tonnes of leatherjacket fish every day which amounted to a total 150 to 180 tonnes of fish per day. The fishes were exported and about one lakh tonnes obtained from 700 trawlers fetched an export value of ₹30 crores (Ref: Tamil newspaper "Dinathanthi" dated September 17, 2023).

Each fish weighed 0.8 to 1.2 kg. The minimum export size was 300 g. The exporter said that the fish skin was peeled, head cut off and the body alone was exported. The exporters were of the opinion that, this fish is extremely tasty, much tastier than pomfret and seer fish. It is much sought-after fish in South-East Asian countries for preparing delicacies like fried rice, soups, salads etc. After seeing the export market, the locals also have started buying this fish at the rate of ₹250 to 280 per kg. The meat quality is white and

firm and the taste is assessed on par with pomfrets and seerfishes by consumers of these fishes. The length and weight range of the fish were from 420 mm to 500 mm and 782 g to 1181 g respectively. Three fourth of the visceral cavity was occupied by the liver and weight of each liver ranged from 60 g to 80 g. A study to assess the utility of this liver to extract oil or consumption is needed. All the specimens were either immature or in maturing condition and fishes with gonads in mature state were not recorded. Male: Female ratio was 1:1.1. While the males were entirely immature (100%), among the females 50% were immature and rest in maturing condition. Male gonads were light cream in colour and female gonads were pink in colour. Gut analysis showed that empty gut was dominant (84.2%) and full stomachs (5.2%) only. Silverbellies, threadfin breams, elvers, prawns and *Acetes* were the major food items. Conversation with fishermen indicated that initially large quantities of leatherjackets emerged off Guntur, Andhra Pradesh in August 2023. The shoal later moved towards south and was spread from along Pazhaverkadu (Pulicat) to Chennai coast. From Pazhaverkadu, the fishery reversed to Guntur. The fish shoal appears to move about 10 km every day and forms fishery at corresponding location. The fishermen co-relate the occurrence to "Vandal thanneer" (upwelling-like phenomenon) that usually occurs along Chennai coast during September-October. According to information in FishBase, this is a benthopelagic fish with adults mostly in deeper waters, and juveniles travel with jellyfish close to the shore. Further investigation on the resource are required to assess the fishery.



Landing of leatherjackets from trawlers in Kasimedu Landing Centre