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FEATURE

Fins, Fish and Fishers - A Tale of Waning Coexistence in the Twin Ports of Kollam, Kerala

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Driven by the curiosity to learn how traditional fishers were responding to scientific advisory services on ocean state, climate, and weather forecasts, my friend and I boarded a train from Ernakulam to Kollam district of Kerala. Though a business graduate, Jamshi, a native and socio-economic enthusiast, joined me to share her roots and extending her experiences with the coastal hubs of Kollam, Kerala. With salt-laden air and the scent of the sea, our journey began on a bright day in December 2018 at the twin ports of Kollam, Sakthikulangara and Neendakara, a first-time visit for me. Our visit was part of a research project assessing the impact of ocean state and marine fishery advisory services on the welfare of coastal fishing communities. We conducted a questionnaire-based survey to understand how fishers perceived, accessed, and used these scientific advisories in daily decision-making. Set against the backdrop of initiatives by Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS), ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, and other institutions promoting forecasts and outreach on source of dissemination, we explored whether these efforts encouraged pro-environmental behaviour, and if traditional ecological knowledge was still alive and well in these communities.

As we walked through the harbour, we conversed with the local fisherfolk and were fascinated by the mix of dialects around us. Most of those we spoke to were migrant fishers from Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. These migrants form the backbone of the fisher workforce and fill the gap left by the dwindling presence of native communities from the Kollam region. It seemed that there were significant labour shortages in the fishery sector, and as a result, the intergenerational transfer of ecological knowledge appeared to be fading.



Pradip N. Chogale

Skin diver harvesting mussels near the harbour waters.

We came away with more questions than we had answers for: Where had the native fishers gone? Had younger generations turned away from the sea, drawn by urban livelihoods or disheartened by economic uncertainties?

We witnessed a thriving yet changing ecosystem, where migrant labourers kept the ports alive, even as the cultural fabric seemed to fray. Beneath the noise and bustle, I sensed a deeper story of resilience, migration, and silent adaptation.

Six years later, in 2024, I returned to Sakthikulangara, not as a researcher this time, but as a participant in a Cetacean Research Methods Introductory Workshop. Led by two passionate mentors, Dr. Dipani Sutaria and Dr. Mahi, this experience was a memorable one to me. With a group of nineteen enthusiasts, we studied cetacean ecology, practiced observation methods, and explored the bay's living world with fresh eyes.



Pradip N. Chogale

Sousa sp. foraging closer to the boat jetty of the Neendakara fishing harbour.

I recognised many familiar sights, including frequent passages of mechanised fishing vessels and small-scale fishing boats, cast netters, crab and mussel divers. The port felt active and busy, just as it was in my previous visit. A shaded path led us to a lookout where the sea stretched wide and vast. And then it happened: “Dolphins! Dolphins! Here they are” someone shouted. The shiny silvery fins cut through the calm waters, appearing and disappearing with predictable regularity. It was my first sighting from the shore, Indian Ocean humpback dolphins (*Sousa plumbea*), leaping and foraging, barely 10-15 meters from us. One magnificent dolphin soared mid-air, chasing fish, etching a moment of joy and jumps.



Fisher from Neendakara, throwing a cast net

Each morning during the workshop, we returned to the same place and, almost like clockwork, we witnessed the dolphins appearing in the same time and space. They surfaced daily, sometimes in small groups, occasionally accompanied by calves or elders. One individual, marked by a distinctive white patch, caught our attention. As Dr. Dipani explained, such markings may indicate old age in *Sousa* dolphins. Their presence suggested that they were resident here. They seemed to know the waters intimately, navigating around trawlers and fibre fishing vessels with grace and resilience. Watching them, I couldn't help but wonder: had their ancestors taught them this route? Were they born here, in these very waves, long before noise and concrete reshaped the coastline?

I often imagined asking them, "Did we disrupt your ancestral path? I'm sorry." Yet, even amid dredged islands, breakwaters, and encroaching development, these dolphins continued their validations of existence to the fittest.

What moved me most was their quiet partnership with fishers. I watched cast netters work alongside dolphins in synchrony, a practice as old as memory itself. Sadly, this coexistence has decreased - another cultural thread at risk of breaking.

Through my visits to this place, I began to view the area not just as a port or survey site but as a living marine realm, a patchwork of sandy shores, rocky edges, mangroves, seaweeds, and corals. I had only begun to appreciate the intricate connections between humans and the marine world: how fishers and dolphins read the sea, adapt to its moods, and depend on its bounty. Both are shaped by the same currents, the same tides of change, and an ever-changing ocean of blue.

This experience transformed me. What began as a quest to study fishers' knowledge became a meditation on coexistence between traditional livelihoods and modern science, as well as between marine mammals and fishing communities. Conservation, I realised, isn't just about species protection. It's about preserving relationships between humans and nature, culture and place.

As I pen this memory, I carry deep gratitude for my mentors who offered me this perspective and admiration for these charismatic megafauna whose intelligence and endurance continue to inspire me. May we strive to ensure that future generations of both humans and dolphins can thrive in these waters, unburdened by disruption, guided instead by harmony with nature as ever.

