

MAHSEER RETURNS TO INDRAYANI RIVER

State Fisheries Dept and Tata Power had jointly initiated the project in 1975

SUSHANT RANJAN

reporters@sakaaltimes.com

Pune: A four-decade-old conservation project has enabled the return of Mahseer fish in the Indrayani river. These fish, which can only be found in clean waters, was not spotted in the river since the 1970s. However, after a successful project initiated in 2010, the fish has been spotted again in its waters.

The project is one among several started by the State Fisheries Department and Tata Power in 1975. It included setting up a Mahseer hatchery at Walwan, Lonavla. Tata Power started the 'Act for Mahseer' initiative, taking the 'tiger of the waters' under its mantle. While the initiative was aimed at reversing the alarming decline of this freshwater fish, it has also opened doors for employment oppor-



READY TO GO: Mahseer being released at the Tata Power hatchery at Lonavla.

ST POSITIVE

tunities among the women and community members dwelling around the hatcheries and fish farms. This initiative is a boon for the country's Eco-Tourism Department as well as the Mahseer makes for a great game fish, attracting an-

glers from all over the world. In 1970, the then Director of Fisheries in Maharashtra, CV Kulkarni collaborated with employees of Tata Power S Moolgaonkar and SP Manaktala to start the conservation project.

► Continued on P2

Mahseer returns to Indrayani river

► Continued from P1

The first batch of 14,000 eggs was brought to the hatchery to be artificially fertilised. Today, the same hatchery breeds nearly 2.5 to 3 lakh fish every year.

“Each year, we supply between 25,000 and 50,000 fish to various states, including Karnataka, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Manipur,” said Vivek Vishwasrao, Chief of Biodiversity, Tata Power. So far, the fish has been sent to 12 states.

“The Mahseer is an important cultural and biological icon of the rivers of India, linking livelihood and biodiversity conservation to each other. The company has developed advanced methods of breeding under safe conditions in hatcheries that have been developed in Walwan, Lonavla,” Vishwasrao said.

THE HATCHERY WORKS

- The Lonavla hatchery has evolved the flow-through a method which involves keeping the eggs in flowing water to simulate conditions of the wild.
 - Eggs are obtained from an adult female Mahseer, aged three years and above.
 - Eight trays are floated in a rectangular cement tank. Each tray can accommodate 30,000 eggs.
 - The tank has a direct water sprinkling system that ensures the water is kept oxygenated, which is
- necessary to bring the eggs to maturity.
- Healthy eggs remain transparent while foul eggs turn opaque. The eggs are checked daily and foul eggs are individually removed using a dropper.
 - Eggs hatch into one-five cm long fries in three to four days.
 - Consignments that are released include fish aged between three to nine months. The remaining fish are released into the six lakes near the hatchery.

At these farms, cage culture and ranching programmes are carried out, and around 300 fishery scientists have been trained

till date to continue this fight. This initiative plays a vital role in improving the livelihood of the village communities where

they are bred.

Women and community members in Walwan are trained to help the fishery scientist with cage farming and fish ranching. Each year, these state-of-the-art hatcheries produce nearly 3.6 lakh semi fingerlings.

Over the last 44 years, more than 13 million fertilised eggs have been obtained. In addition to this, 7 million Mahseer fingerlings have been freed into rivers, but not before ensuring that the Mahseer are native to the region, and a proper programme has been put in place to induct the fish into the wild.

“The river is found to be very clean at spots where the fish is found because it requires high levels of dissolved oxygen in the water. It cannot survive in muddy waters,” Vishwasrao added.

“In its natural habitat,

the survival rate of the fish is about 30 per cent. But, here at the hatchery, we are able to provide optimal conditions for the eggs and achieve a survival rate of 60-65 per cent,” Vishwasrao said.

The fish breeds in clean shallow waters in rocky areas in the monsoon. The eggs stick to the rocky surfaces. However, the fish do not tend to the eggs once they've been laid and immediately return to deeper waters, he added.

A unique fish that swims upstream against fast-flowing waters and tides, this fish can grow up to nine feet and weigh nearly 35-40 kg. The depletion of its numbers can cause an ecological imbalance. ‘Act of Mahseer’, a public awareness campaign, was launched in May so as to preserve the fish.