

Tiger (going out) of the waters?

The story of the endangered tiger is well known. But what about the mahseer, the endangered mega fish?

W elcome to a new story because most people are probably not even aware that there is something called the tiger of the waters.

The mahseer is a celebrated creature among those who relish fishing, and is considered one of the 20 species of mega fish of the world. A single fish can grow up to nine feet long and weigh between 40 and 55 kg: the kind of fish that makes anglers travel continents to sight one.

For much of the mahseer celebration, we have the British to thank. This large freshwater creature was pursued by avid English anglers who discovered that it was as exotic as the European salmon. Gradually, the mahseer rose in local esteem: it was used as a symbol in the heraldry of Muslim-ruled princely states like Baoni, Bhopal, Kurwal and Rampur; it became an emblem of the highest honour among royalty, in the courts of Oudh and the Paigah nobles of Hyderabad.

Two things happened in the seven decades that affected the destiny of the water tiger. One, the British left India and took the mahseer obsession with them. As this celebrated fish went gradually off the mental map, something else began to happen: increased construction of river valley projects, multi-purpose dams, shrinking habitat, poaching, and commercial exploitation.

Besides, even as fish were included within the definition of 'wildlife' under section 2(1) of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, it does not explicitly draw attention to fish under the definition of 'wild animal', for which hunting has been prohibited. Result: ambiguity leading to poaching and unmonitored angling.

In the space of a few decades, five of the 15 mahseer species found in India (of 47 that exist) have already been listed as endangered and two as near-threatened in the International Union



for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. The decline in the number of mahseer has been more than 50 per cent in recent years; the figure is expected to go up to 80 per cent in the next couple of years on account of industrial and human pollution.

The Maharashtra fisheries department was one of the first to raise the alarm in the '70s. Rather than fight the battle alone ('we know everything'), it did something different: it enlisted the help of a private sector company, Tata Power. The engagement of Tata Power was perhaps not as unconnected as it might appear; power plants work intimately with the prevailing eco-system, which can often modify ambient realities, affecting the survival of a number of change-intolerant creatures.

The result of this engagement was a mahseer breeding centre with Central Institute of Fisheries Education, which established standard breeding techniques following decades of study at its Lonavala breeding centre.

There are a number of reasons why Save the Mahseer project needs to be taught as part of environment studies in schools across the country.

One, the sheer effectiveness of the

project for all those who believe that nothing concrete (okay, okay, inappropriate word!) really comes out of them: in more than four decades, the project has produced more than 13 million fertilised eggs and over seven million fingerlings for stocking water bodies within India (Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, and Assam).

Two, the company carried out cage culture and ranching programmes. Around 300 fishery scientists have been trained to take the fight forward.

Three, Tata Power is not positioning itself as some agency that has cracked the code and is smug in its corner; it is venturing to share learnings with other hatcheries so that what could have possibly started out as a standalone initiative becomes a pan-India movement.

Four, the initiative has translated into downstream success. There are a number of instances when the mahseer was re-introduced into rivers from where it had been wiped out. For instance, the mahseer was reintroduced into the Indrayani River in Maharashtra where the presence of chemical effluents had virtually exterminated the species.

Five, Tata Power recently launched a campaign to donate a fingerling for

each 'Save the Mahseer' pledge taken by the public (2,250 have pledged till date from the world over), transforming online commitment into improving ground reality. The company confers a 'Fish's Knight' title upon individuals who help sensitise citizens on saving the mahseer (the best Knights potentially winning a trip to a location marked by mahseer conservation).

Six, Tata Power is enhancing awareness through the launch of a three-pronged approach to educate, engage, and empower mahseer lovers. A micro-site has been launched for mahseer conservation, a Mahseer travelogue series has been initiated to 'educate'; a gaming app and Mahseer Conservation Day comprise the 'engage' stage; the 'empower' stage comprises conservation initiatives like donation drives and volunteering for habitat adoption, making this one of the country's biggest conservation efforts after Project Tiger.

Seven, Tata Power introduced the concept of experiential education marked by visits to the hatchery rather than theoretical communication.

If this programme succeeds, we might have a day when the awe-inspiring fish returns to prominent consciousness and visual insignia.

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