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AQUATIC WONDER

King of freshwater gets ally in schoolkids

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Mumbai: Soham Deshinker (14), student of a Thane-based school, could barely wait to go back to school and tell his classmates about his "wild" experience. For Soham not only saw the "Tiger" of the fish hatching from its egg, but he was also among the lucky few who managed to touch the mighty Mahseer, also known as the king of freshwater.

In an awe-inspiring journey, 48 students from eight schools and a handful of teachers witnessed various life stages of Mahseer — from eggs to fingerlings to fish — at the hatchery. The conservation breeding programme is being run by the Tata power at Walwan Dam in Lonavala, under its Act for Mahseer initiative. The campaign itself is part of Tata's eco-restoration and eco-development projects for lakes.

The programme

The alarming decline in fish population due to loss of habitat and pollution of water bodies led to the beginning of the Mahseer conservation initiative in 1975. Subsequently, a breeding centre was set up in Lonavala with help of the Central Institute of Fisheries Education (CIFE).

Today, this hatchery is known for having the biggest breeding stock of Mahseer in India and produces 4 to 5 lakh Mahseer fries every year. The mighty fish, in whose pursuit anglers from around the globe travel to India, is now being released in rivers across the country.

The hatchery

The Mahseer hatchery is located on five acres of land and has several small ponds. "There are different sections, the main being the hatchery where extremely tiny eggs are kept in water and the oxygen

WHY MAHSEER IS UNDER THREAT

- Loss of habitat
- Industrial and human pollution leading to loss of breeding grounds
- Indiscriminate fishing
- Impacts of river valley projects
- Introduction of exotic species

content is increased using small fountains. The staff keeps a round-the-clock watch for almost 92 hours, till the eggs are hatched. In between, they also keep removing the opaque, spilt eggs using an ink dropper, as they can affect other eggs as well," said Vivek Vishwasrao, head of biodiversity at Tata Power.

He informed that even after hatching, the Mahseer remain in the hatchery for the next 30-25 days. Then they are shifted to the ponds where they are

kept for three-and-a-half months. After that, they are fit for transportation. "Once we receive a demand for the fries from various places, about 1,000 fries are packed in 20-litre bags with five litres of water. The rest of the space is left for air. We do not, however, introduce Mahseer in any water body, unless guided by the CIFE," said Vishwasrao, adding that the Centre also has brooders that are kept for about 12 years, till they are about two feet. After that they are released in lakes that are under Tata Power and already have an existing Mahseer population.

In fact, the hatchery only breeds two species of Mahseer — the Deccan Mahseer (Tor khudree) that is endemic to Maharashtra and was first reported in 1870s at Mula-Mutha river in Pune, and the Golden Mahseer (Tor putitora).

"There is no parenting among Mahseer. They lay the

eggs and leave. The survival rate of these eggs and young ones is around 30 per cent in nature. But in our hatchery, we were able to take it to 60 per cent," said Vishwasrao. He has been working with this hatchery for 28 years now.

Students 'Act for Mahseer'

According to Vishwasrao, Act for Mahseer is a call for action. The public campaign is aimed at spreading awareness about Mahseer to help preserve this species at national level, with a three-pronged approach — educate, engage and empower Mahseer lovers. As part of the campaign, several national conferences have been held.

"Last October, we decided to have students visit the facility, which is otherwise a restricted area. They can be the perfect ambassadors for conservation of Mahseer," he said,

Photos: Aadesh Choudhary/dna



(Clockwise from below) Members of Tata Power's Mahseer Conservation and Breeding Programme: a worker removes the opaque, spilt fish eggs using an ink dropper so that they don't affect the other eggs; after hatching, the tiny Mahseer fries are shown to schoolchildren; an employee displays a grown Mahseer, also known as the king of freshwater; and Mahseer being collected to be transported to waterbodies across the country. The fish is among the 20 mega ones of the world. It can grow up to nine feet and can weigh between 40kg and 55kg, making it an outstanding game and food fish.