

Yet another World Environment Day is behind us; we focus on the endangered rhinoceros and the mahseer that need protection.

Save the mighty mahseer

Despite Tata Power's sustainable campaign and breeding programme, the fish remains elusive.

MADHUMITHA

SRINIVASAN

Fishing for mahseer in a well-stocked submontane river is, in my opinion, the most fascinating of all field sports. Our environments, even though we may not be continuously conscious of them, nevertheless play a very important part in the sum total of our enjoyment of any form of outdoor sport.

The Fish of My Dreams by
Jim Corbett



*A massive humpback mahseer caught from the Cauvery in 2008, and released back into the water.
(Below) A blue finned mahseer. COURTESY: ADRIAN PINDER*

If he were alive today, Jim Corbett may not be a happy man given the state of his favourite sport, fish and the environment.

With freshwater ecosystems the most endangered and, ironically, the most poorly protected, it is no surprise then that Corbett's favourite mahseer is endangered.

The 'Mighty Mahseer' is the kind of legendary fish that makes anglers traverse continents in the mere hope of sighting one. It is the only fish that made three Englishmen travel overland to India in search of the presumably extinct fish. Yet, the 'tiger of the water' does not enjoy the same attention and fuss as the tiger of the land. "Out of sight, out of mind," say experts.

Mahseers, which are large freshwater fish, were popular during the Colonial era when avid English anglers discovered that this native species offered all the thrills of a European salmon. Post-Independence, interest in these fishes too died down, until 1977 when three Englishmen — part of the Trans World Fishing Team — set out to India in search of the legendary fish that was presumed to be extinct. After covering 15,000 miles in their Land Rover, they managed to catch the largest specimen ever seen in decades, thus reigniting interest in the mahseer and the sport of angling. Of the mahseer species found in India, five are listed as endangered, two as near threatened in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Interestingly, it is angling that helped two experts raise an alarm about a species of mahseer that may go extinct even before it can be officially named. Scientist Adrian Pinder's fascination with the majestic fish began when, as an eight-year-old, he saw a photograph of

"an archetypal, European gent, chest deep in a majestic river with an Indian guide assisting him in cradling a gigantic fish." Along with fellow scientist and member of the Mahseer Trust, Dr. Rajeev Raghavan of St. Albert's College, Kochi, Pinder studied the angler-catch data gathered between 1998 and 2012 in the Cauvery and came to realise that the river's mahseer community had undergone considerable shifts in the last 30 years. They were able to establish that the humpback mahseer population was declining alarmingly, while the blue-finned mahseer was slowly taking over the habitat. The latter, they found, "originated from the TEC (Tata Electric Company) hatchery and was introduced during the late 1980s."

Decline in the numbers of mahseer is not a recent phenomenon. The report of the National Commission on Agriculture (NCA) in 1976 may have been the first to highlight the need for mahseer conservation. Destruction of their habitat, poaching, indiscriminate fishing, construction of dams and limited resources are some of the factors putting pressure on their population.

This is what first led the Maharashtra fisheries department to approach Tata Power to help save the endangered fish. Thus the Mahseer project, started in the 1970s, established standard techniques of breeding the species over decades of study at its breeding centre at Lonavla. Till date, it has produced in excess of 10 million fingerlings of mahseer and



distributed them all over India. Its findings on breeding methods have proved valuable and have even been replicated in several mahseer breeding facilities across the country.

S.N. Ogale, who spearheaded Tata Power's mahseer project since 1971, says the fact that four species of mahseer co-exist in the hatchery in Lonavla is enough to disprove the claim that the introduced blue-finned mahseers have caused the decline of the humpback. For Ogale, the conservation of the mahseer has greater ecological significance. "Besides the Tata Power project, independently we have been able to reintroduce the mahseer into Maharashtra's Indrayani where chemical effluents almost wiped out its endemic mahseer population."

The Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 too adds to the existing inconsistencies and offers little by way of relief to endangered species. "Despite fishes being included within the definition of 'wildlife', under Section 2(1), the Act does not explicitly draw attention to fish under the definition of

'wild animal'. The Act states that no person shall hunt any 'wild animal' specified in the Schedule," states the report released by Pinder and Raghavan.

"Even forest department officials are not aware of how to protect aquatic life. Take Corbett, for instance. It has one of the biggest populations of the golden mahseer but there is no guard to keep an eye on it," says Raghavan. This is where angling can help, feels Pinder who points to the Cauvery as a case study. Prior to the ban on angling in the region in 2012, which mostly operates on catch-and-release technique, the local community was gainfully employed by angling tourism and became aware of how the mahseer was worth more alive than dead — by poaching they would earn a fraction of what they were making as guides for international anglers. He talks of gun fights between the local guides and poachers to highlight how far the people went to protect the local fish population.

WWF's report on mahseer conservation in India suggests the establishment of a steering group comprising experts from various government and scientific departments and community representatives, establishment of Mahseer 'Conservation Reserves', community-based angling, and awareness and capacity building. Unless conservation methods are reworked urgently, it is just a matter of time before Corbett's favourite mahseer turns from a dream to a mere memory.