

Trading health for wealth: Distributional inequities and uncompensated health risks in Sea cucumber dive fishery in Sri Lanka



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Sea cucumber fishery is a dive fishery with historical and artisanal origins. In the early stages, gleaning was practiced in shallow marine areas but overtime the fishery has expanded. Nowadays, fisherwomen collect sea cucumber from coastal shallow seas while in the deeper seas, fishing is being carried out by male divers who dive with or without breathing support. Nearly half of the diving community are self-trained divers, most of whom are artisanal fishers. Diving is not regulated for sea cucumber fishery. There is a general requirement for divers to register and carry a diving license, in addition to using registered boats. However, monitoring and surveillance are not strictly adhered to.

Fishing is managed by fishery associations at landing sites (i.e., community organizations) or by commercial exporters who hire divers. Even the self-employed divers end up selling their catch, either fresh or dried, to commercial exporters. Government does not regulate sea cucumber fishing even though divers and boats have to be licensed. As a result, there has been a sharp increase in fishing activity that is driven by value chain incentives and smuggling of sea cucumber over the Sri Lanka-India sea border.

Photo: Sea cucumber diver in North western sea bed of Sri Lanka, 2022 © A. Maheepala

Location:

Northern Peninsula Sea, Gulf of Mannar sea belt, North Eastern sea belt

Ecosystem type:

Marine

Main gear:

Gleaning supported by SCUBA equipment and boats

Target species:

Holothuria Sp.
Thelenota Sp.
Bohadschia Sp.

Vessel type:

Fiber-Reinforced Plastic (FRP) boat

No. of small-scale fishers:
5,000-7,000

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Justice in context

Types of justice:

- **Distributive**
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- **Market**
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- Regulatory
- Procedural
- Environmental
- **COVID-19 related**
- **Other: Illegal practices (theft & smuggling)**

The issue of justice in the sea cucumber dive fishery comes into play in two particular ways. One is the unequal distribution of benefits across the value chain as sharing of benefits and risks is not equitably structured in the current value chain. Divers and boat-owners obtain a relatively small return to their inputs and effort while a large portion of the market premium for exportable catch goes to either collectors or exporter companies. The second issue is that the private and social costs of diving-related health hazards, which are not addressed or compensated by any of the actors in the value chain or the public authorities. Given the nature of effort and associated risks in diving to depths in excess of 70 feet, such economic inequities appear particularly unjust.

Divers experience decompression sickness and other underwater pressure-related ailments that can be life-threatening. While export market premium is high for most sea cucumber species collected in Sri Lankan waters, the value chain does not compensate fishers who exert a potentially life-threatening effort. For instance, based on a study carried out in 2020 (Prasada, 2020), a sea cucumber diver dives on average 75 feet, fetching LKR 501 (USD 2.5 in 2020 prices) per animal, on average. At the same time, the price of local sea cucumber in the export markets was LKR 10,000 (USD 50 in 2020 prices) per animal, on average. The contrast of low margins earned by the diver, who is risking his life, compared to the profits accrued by other actors in the value chain could not be more unbalanced.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

The fisheries act of Sri Lanka does not define the small-scale fisher. However, Sri Lanka's policy framework (i.e., National fisheries and Aquatic policy of 2018) highlights the need for protecting and improving the conditions facing the traditional, artisanal, and marginalized fisher groups. Depending on the species caught, the conditions in the landing site and associated revenues, and the season, a small-scale fisher could vary from anyone gleaning from the shallow sea waters to a person fishing using powered boats and modern harvesting methods. A common characteristic of the small-scale fisheries is its subsistent nature.

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Dealing with justice

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The economic exploitation of the value chain is concurrent with the expansion of Asia-Pacific consumer demand. Therefore, the increased pressure in fishing effort and inequalities are observable more prominently in the recent past, particularly in the last 5 years, and are expected to exacerbate in the future with the rise of consumers' purchasing power in China and the rest of Asia-Pacific. This issue is receiving more attention now from the academia and the research community and is likely to garner consensus and support in the next few years. Meanwhile, public institutions are yet to come up with a stock management strategy and a set of guidelines for responsible value chain conduct.

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Other types of delay in addressing the injustices are observable in the context of COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021 and during the Sri Lanka's economic crisis of 2021/2022. The small-scale fishing operators of sea cucumber fishery were hit hard, alongside the other small-scale fisheries, due to the collapse of supply chains and fuel scarcity. There was no credible solution or special attention paid to small-scale fisheries during these episodes due to the lack of legislative protections of small-scale fishing operators, vis-à-vis tourism operators, for instance, who received legislative provisions for livelihood support and compensation.

Sea cucumber catch from North western sea bed of Sri Lanka, 2022 © A. Maheepala



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