MURICID SHELL TRADE IN SOUTHEAST COAST OF INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Muricidae constitute a widely distributed and most distinctive family of gastropod molluscs which plays an important role as a source of income to fishermen in India. The earliest use of Murex snails was as a source of dyes and goes back to the days of Phoenicians. Later Greeks and Romans made use of the valuable colouring material. The muricids secrete a yellowish fluid which when boiled and treated makes a permanent purple dye. Wool and cotton dyed with this so-called "Royal Tyrian" purple fetched very high prices. This trade was known in the eastern Mediterranean and the ancient empires of the Middle East at least 5,000 years ago. Creteis is believed to be the place where the production of purple dye was first discovered and developed. The seafaring Phoenicians became chief collectors and distributors of this marvelous dye. It is understood that the settlement of Phoenicians in the eastern Mediterranean was mainly because of this dye.

However, the use of this dye is not very much known in India. The utilization of muricids is restricted to handicrafts and ornamental purposes. In recent time there seems to be an awareness in the shell trade in India. There are five major shell trading centers existing in the study area, i.e. along the southeast coast of India. The major trading centers are Cuddalore (sector I), Rameswaram, Mandapam (sector II), Tuticorin (sector III), and Cape Comorin (sector IV).

Collection of shell

The Muricidae are collected mainly for the operculum and shell. These shells are collected by trawler, while trawling bottom finfishes and shellfishes or by lobster netting (Chingi Valau) or hand picking by diving. The economically important muricid shells are; Chicoreus ramosus, C. brunneus, C. virgineus, C. torrefactus, C. palmarosae, Murex tribulus, M. trapa, Haustellum haustellum, Thais sp., Rapana rapiformis and Cymia lacera.

Shell scales

The collected muricids are sold at the fish landing centers by the fishermen. Since most of the landing centers are located in remote coastal villages, these shells are purchased by middlemen living in and around the villages. The shells purchased by the middlemen are stored in their home and brought to a purchaser (middleman) located in the suburbs of major towns, near coastal areas. These purchasers will again sell these shells to the shell industries who in turn will do the marketing locally or for export.

Shell processing

The muricids are first cleaned manually to remove the ephiphytic flora and fauna. Then these shells are boiled after removing the operculum. The soft part of the shell is removed after boiling and dipped into diluted hydrochloric acid (HCl). The shells are then washed with caustic soda before they are ready for marketing.

Marketing of processed shell and operculum

The polished shells are mainly marketed to tourist centers of India, in metropolitan areas. The shells are also exported to Singapore, Malaysia, Canada, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, China and the USA. Shells measuring 20-30 cm are sold for 40-50 rupees in India. However, the actual export value of this shell is not known because the shell traders did not want to reveal
the truth. However, the opercula of muricid shells are sold at the cost of 600-700 rupees per kilogram. The buyer of opercula said that they were used for medicine abroad, which may contain the truth.

Suggestions

It is unfortunate that the flesh of several hundreds of larger muricids can not be sold and consumed by people of India (with some exceptions). The project is going to focus on the value of muricid flesh in order to create a desire among people to start consumption.

It is also aimed at informing the fisherfolk about the price of the shells so that the poor fishermen can get a fair price for their hard labour.