SHELL TRADE AND MARKETING WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHICOREUS RAMOSUS ALONG THE SOUTHEAST COAST OF INDIA: INTERVIEWS WITH SHELL TRADERS

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INTRODUCTION

The demand for the molluscan shells and shell products, mostly those with beautiful shape and colours, is rapidly increasing. Besides being used as raw material for many calcium carbonate based industries and domestic appliances, they are also used in exquisite handicrafts. In consequence many small scale industries started along the coastal areas. Hence, it is important to receive views from the shell traders as part of the Tropical Marine Mollusc Programme in order to have basic information on the shell trade and marketing, particularly on Chicoreus ramosus. Interviews were conducted in towns along the southeast coast of India. 12 shell traders were interviewed at Cuddalore area whereas 6 and 5 traders were interviewed at Rameswaram and Tuticorin areas respectively.

Our main theme was divided into five divisions viz. 1. General information 2. Marketing of shells 3. Information on shell products 4. Information on Chicoreus ramosus trades and 5. Information on Chicoreus ramosus marketing.

1. General Information

Among the 23 shell traders interviewed, 12 run wholesale business with shop and factory, 5 traders have both wholesale and retail business and 6 do exclusively retail business without factory. The wholesale traders get shells directly from the fishermen whereas, the retailers depend only on the wholesale traders. Two wholesale traders from Cuddalore and Rameswaram areas also import shells from South Africa, The Philippines, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Tanzania. The average income for wholesale traders ranges from Rs.2500 to Rs.5000 per month whereas, for retail traders it is from Rs.500 to Rs.2000 per month. Most of the retailers experience stiff competition from the wholesale traders whereas the wholesale traders face problems like lack of skilled labourers, Government taxes, scarcity of shells and restriction by Government for certain molluscan fishery (eg. Xancus).

2. Marketing of Shells

For marketing both wholesale and retail traders depend on domestic markets within India, especially the tourist places. At present only two wholesalers import shells from foreign countries (Xancus from Tanzania and Cowries from Africa). However, they do not export shells to any foreign country. Tourists are the major customers followed by regular customers and shell collectors. The important shells in the market are Fasciolaria trapezium, Chicoreus ramosus, Hemifusus pugilinus, Xancus pyrum, Conus sp., Murex brunneus, Vasum turbinellum, Babylonia sp., Pteroceras lambis, and Donax sp.

3. Shell Products

Home decorating articles such as lamp shades, pen stands, photo frames, paper weights and toys made out of shells form the major domestic markets followed by ornamental products for ladies such as ear rings, rings, combs, hair clips, bangles and chains and other domestic products like garland, curtains, wall mats, ash trays and spoons.

4. Chicoreus ramosus Trades

Most of the traders (80%) are of the opinion that if the Centre of Advanced Study in Marine Biology (CASMB) or Department of
Fisheries (DOF) or Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) are able to culture *Chicoreus ramosus*, the demand for its meat, shell and operculum will definitely be increased further. The demand for *C. ramosus* operculum ranks first followed by the shell and the meat. In this context it is important to note that only recently the *Chicoreus* meat has been of great demand. But some traders (20%) have the idea that it is impossible to culture *C. ramosus* successfully by any research organisations since these animals take long time to grow and also the nearshore topography may not provide a suitable habitat for them.

However, if any research organisation takes steps to conduct research on these muricids to provide information for management and conservation aspects, they are ready to co-operate and to accept their research findings with full support and are willing to canvass the fishermen to prevent over-exploitation.

Regarding the farming of *C. ramosus*, 50% of the traders are interested to enter into the farming activities provided the demand of the *Chicoreus* meat increases like other seafoods. The other 50% are not interested in *Chicoreus* farming at all.

Some traders expressed their views that since *C. ramosus* does not have a regular fishery, they cannot expect regular income through these gastropod molluscs and so their trade dependence is not only on these gastropods.

Some traders indicated that at times beautiful *Chicoreus* shells are attacked by borers and they obtain only a low price for such shells.

5. *Chicoreus ramosus* marketing

A single *Chicoreus* shell without any damage fetches Rs.25 to Rs.30. Tourist places such as Rameswaram, Cape Comerin, Madras, Mahabalipuram, Cochin and Bombay are the major domestic marketing places. There is no foreign trade for *Chicoreus* shells and also there are no regular customers for these shells.

One kilogram of *Chicoreus* operculum costs Rs.900 in domestic markets at Colachal, Cape Comerin, Tuticorin, Mandapam and Cuddalore. The operculum is exported to European countries also. However, we could not get the actual foreign market price and its uses. It is believed that the operculum is used for making cosmetics and medicines also.

In the domestic markets at Cape Comerin, Tuticorin, Mandapam and Cuddalore, 1 kg *Chicoreus* meat costs Rs.30 to Rs.35. For some coastal fisherfolk *Chicoreus* meat serves as food. But the majority of the meat is exported to southeast Asian Countries such as the Philippines and Singapore and to Sri Lanka.

CONCLUSION

In general, all the shell traders are fully aware of the real values of *Chicoreus* operculum, shell and meat and especially nowadays, the meat is gaining fame very fast. However, their major problems regarding *Chicoreus ramosus* trade and marketing are:

- lack of regular fishery for *Chicoreus ramosus*
- no proper encouragement from Government to export *Chicoreus* products to foreign countries
- indiscriminate exploitation by the fishermen occasionally
- natural attack on beautiful shells by borers thus reducing the value of the shells.