

## Age, Growth and Population Dynamics of an Endangered Fish *Sahyadria denisonii* (Day 1865) from the Western Ghats Hotspot of India

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### Abstract

The population structure, age, growth, mortality and harvest intensity of redline torpedo barb *Sahyadria denisonii* (Day 1865) in the River Valapattanam was studied using length-frequency based analysis. The von Bertalanffy growth functions estimated were  $L_t=158 [1-e^{-0.8(t+0.0203)}]$  and growth parameters of von Bertalanffy equation were  $L_\infty=158$  mm,  $K=0.8$  year<sup>-1</sup> and  $t_0=-0.0203$ . The present level of exploitation ( $E=0.60$ ) is higher than the Gulland equation ( $E=0.5$ ) which is an indication of over exploitation. The recruitment pattern was continuous, and displaying a single major peak event per year. Management practices recommend the establishment of a closed season from November to February to protect the spawning stock and stock wise river ranching of captive bred young ones.

### Introduction

Age and growth determination in fish are important aspects of population dynamics, which forms the basis of calculations of growth, mortality and recruitment (Sparre and Venema 1992; Coban et al. 2013). These parameters provide tools for scientific interpretation of population dynamics as well as formulation of conservation policies. Though comprehensive information on the population regulation and exploitation patterns of a large number of marine fish species are currently available (Maccord et al. 2007), similar database on freshwater fishes of India is yet to be generated. A few available reports are those of Qasim and Bhatt (1964), Khan and Siddiqui (1973), Desai and Shrivastava (1990), Kurup (1997), Bhatt et al. (2000), Euphrasia (2004), Kurup et al. (2008), Manojkumar (2007) and Prasad et al. (2012).

Exploitation of freshwater fishes from rivers of Kerala (India) gained great momentum during the last decade, which has led to the depletion of many species of freshwater indigenous fish resources. Raghavan et al. (2013) reported that more than 1.5 million freshwater fishes of 30 threatened species were traded from India during 2005-2012, to which *Sahyadria denisonii* (Day 1865) contributed a major share.

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Over the last few decades wild population of *S. denisonii* has declined due to indiscriminate aquarium trade (Mercy et al. 2013a; Raghavan et al. 2013; Liya and Ramachandran 2013). According to the latest IUCN assessment, *S. denisonii* is listed under the endangered category. In this context, this species is considered a suitable candidate for the study of population characteristics to ascertain the present status of the stock. In the present study an attempt is made to investigate the age, growth, mortality, and exploitation parameters of this species, which may help in designing suitable management policies for its conservation.

## Materials and Methods

The Western Ghats, extending along the west coast of India (180,000 km), is one of 34 global biodiversity hotspots (Raghavan et al. 2011). Monthly samples of the fish were collected from the catch for aquarium trade at collection sites in River Valapattanam, Kerala during September 2011-August 2013 (n=1,037). Valapattanam River lies in the Western Ghats region of South India (Latitude 11°93'N; Longitude 73°73'E) and has an overall passage length of 110 km. The sampling sites were selected based on the high occurrence of *S. denisonii* in the catches of local fishermen. Samples were collected using the encircling/drag net (40-60 m length, 1.0-2.0 m depth and 6 mm mesh size), which is capable of retaining small and larger fishes. The randomly sampled live fishes were anaesthetised at a dose of 300 mg·L<sup>-1</sup> of MS-222 (Mercy et al. 2013b) and then preserved in 10% formalin. Length was measured with Vernier callipers to the nearest 0.1 cm, by following the standard procedures described by Dwivedi and Menezes (1974).

Length frequency data were processed by the methodology of Gayanilo et al. (2005) using the length based approaches described in the FAO-ICLARM stock assessment tool (FiSAT-II) package. Length frequency data were grouped into 10 mm class interval and analysed using FiSAT-II software. The inverse von Bertalanffy growth equation was used to determine *S. denisonii* lengths at different ages (Sparre and Venema 1992). Growth parameters like asymptotic length ( $L_{\infty}$ ), growth coefficient ( $K$ ) and  $t_0$  were obtained using the ELEFAN programme from the fitted curve with maximum goodness-of-fit ( $R_n$ ). The growth equation can be written as:  $L_t = L_{\infty}[1 - \exp^{-K(t - t_0)}]$ ; where,  $L_t$  = length at age  $t$ ,  $L_{\infty}$  = asymptotic length or the maximum length that the fish can theoretically attain,  $exp$  = base of the natural log,  $K$  = growth coefficient (the rate at which the fish approaches asymptotic length),  $t$  = age of fish,  $t_0$  = the hypothetical age which the fish would have had at zero length. ' $t_0$ ' was estimated using Bertalanffy (1938) plot in which the results of the regression of  $\ln(1 - L_t/L_{\infty})$  against ' $t$ ' was used.

Mortality coefficients, viz., total mortality ( $Z$ ), instantaneous natural mortality ( $M$ ), fishing mortality ( $F$ ) and exploitation rate ( $E$ ) were estimated using the FiSAT-II programme (Pauly 1980; Gayanilo and Pauly 1997). Natural mortality was calculated using the empirical formula:  $\log(M) = 0.0152 - 0.279 \log(L_{\infty}) + 0.6543 \log(K) + 0.463 \log(T)$  of Pauly (1980). The optimum length of exploitation ( $L_{opt}$ ) was estimated empirically from the equation of Froese and Binohlan (2000) as  $L_{opt} = 3 * L_{\infty} / (3 + M/K)$ , where  $L_{\infty}$  = the asymptotic length,  $M$  = the natural mortality and  $K$  = the growth coefficient.

By plotting the cumulative probability of capture against mid-length, from this resultant curve, the length at first capture ( $L_c$ ) was taken as corresponding to the cumulative probability at 50%. Length structured virtual population analysis was estimated using FiSAT-II programme. The longevity ( $t_{max}$ ) of the species was then calculated from  $t_{max} = 3/K$  by Pauly and Munro (1984).

The total stock was estimated by the relation between yield and exploitation ratio: total stock =  $Y/U$ , where  $Y$  = yield and  $U$  = exploitation ratio. The relative yield-per-recruit ( $Y/R$ ) model of Beverton and Holt (1966) incorporated in the FiSAT programme was used to estimate the  $Y/R$  and relative biomass-per-recruit ( $B/R$ ). The computed exploitation rate ( $E$ ) was compared with the expected values of  $E_{max}$  (the value of exploitation rate giving maximum  $Y/R$ ),  $E_{10}$  (the value of 'E' at which marginal increase in  $Y/R$  is 10% of its value at  $E = 0$ ) and  $E_{50}$  (the value of 'E' at 50% of the unexploited  $B/R$ ) (Sparre and Venema 1992; Gayanilo and Pauly 1997).

## Results

### *Population structure and recruitment*

The sampled population of *S. denisonii* from the River Valapattanam during September 2011 to August 2013 ranged in size from 33 to 140 mm total length. Maximum length was recorded in the length class of 130-140 mm and 50-60 mm length group were the dominant classes. The smallest individual was sampled during April-June (33 mm), while the largest individual (140 mm) was sampled during October. Maximum number of samples was collected during 2011-2012 in the length class of 50-60 mm and during 2012-2013 in 80-90 mm length class. This study suggests that there are specific trends in the catches of *S. denisonii* in different months.

### *Age and growth parameters*

The original length frequency distribution was restructured (10 mm class interval) and the best fitting growth curve was obtained by the method of joining peaks using the ELEFAN-I routines incorporated in the FiSAT-II package. The best value of the ratio of the number of peaks through which the curve passes relative to the total number of peaks ( $R_n$ ) obtained was 0.499. The growth parameters were estimated as  $L_{\infty} = 158$  mm,  $K = 0.8 \text{ year}^{-1}$  and  $t_0 = -0.0203$  for River Valapattanam. Growth curve showed that the whole population of *S. denisonii* comprised of a single cohort which originated during December-February (Fig. 1). These results suggested that the fish have a relatively short life cycle with a fast growth rate. The longevity ( $t_{max}$ ) of the species was calculated from the relationship described by Pauly and Munro (1984) and  $t_{max} = 3/K$ , using the 'K' which was calculated as 3.75 years for the River Valapattanam. Estimated length at age by empirical method is shown in Fig. 2. Based on the values arrived at through ELEFAN-I, the von Bertalanffy growth function equation (VBGF) of *S. denisonii* (Fig. 2) can be expressed as:  $L_t = 158 [1 - e^{-0.8(t+0.0203)}]$ .

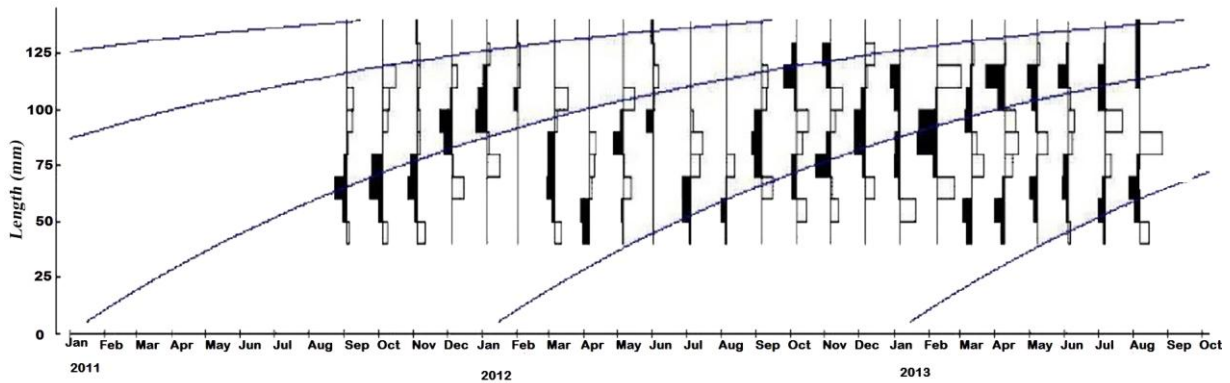


Fig. 1. Monthly restructured length frequency distribution of *Sahyadria denisonii* with the estimated growth curves.

On applying the VBGF equation, *S. denisonii* attained a length of 88.15 mm at the end of the first year, 126.61 mm at the end of the second year, 143.9 mm at the end of the third year and 151.66 mm at the end of the fourth year of life (Table. 1). *Sahyadria denisonii* was found to exhibit fastest increment in length during the first year of its life (38.46 mm). Age of captured fishes ranged between '0' to 'III', and the first and second year classes were dominant. The length at first maturity ( $L_m$ ) was estimated as 81 mm (80-90 mm) and 92 mm (90-100 mm) for males and females respectively (Sajan 2015) implying that fish caught at 0+ year class are highly vulnerable to fishing before reaching their first spawning (Fig. 2).

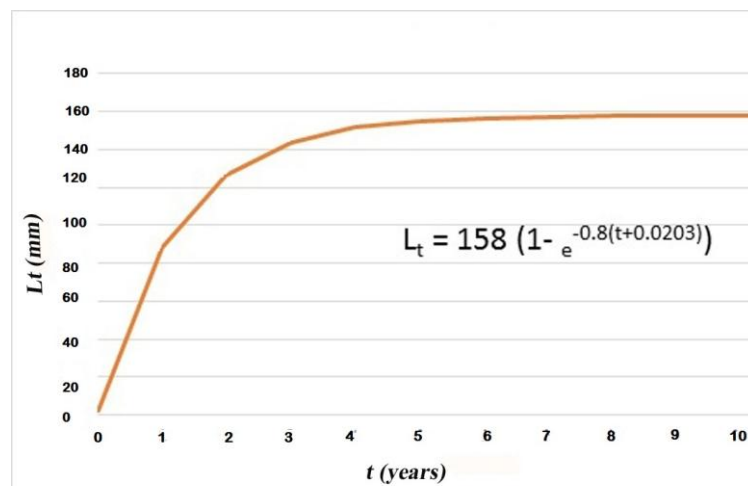


Fig. 2. Length at age of pooled population of *Sahyadria denisonii*.

### Estimation of mortality and exploitation

The length converted catch curve from mortality estimates of pooled population of *S. denisonii* of the River Valapattanam is depicted in Fig. 3. The instantaneous total mortality coefficient ( $Z$ ) of *S. denisonii* was estimated as 2.09 year<sup>-1</sup>. Natural mortality-coefficient ( $M$ ) of *S. denisonii* was estimated as 0.83 year<sup>-1</sup>. The fishing mortality ( $F = Z - M$ ) computed for *S. denisonii* was 1.26 year<sup>-1</sup>. The exploitation rate ( $E = F/Z$ ) was estimated as 0.60. The optimum length ( $L_{opt}$ ) estimated empirically by Froese and Binohlan (2000) was 111.39 mm and the estimated  $L_{opt}/L_{\infty}$  value was 0.74.

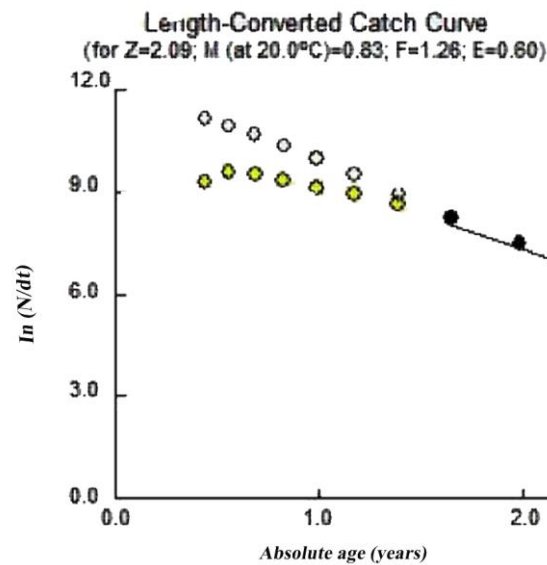


Fig. 3. Total mortality ( $Z$ ) using by linearised catch curve method.

### Probability of capture

The estimates of probabilities of capture and length at first capture ( $L_c$ ) values were calculated using the length converted catch curve method which was plotted in Fig. 4. The values obtained by probabilities of capture were  $L_{25} = 55$  mm,  $L_{50} = 90$  mm and  $L_{75} = 105$  mm. The minimum length at first maturity ( $L_m$ ) for female of *S. denisonii* was observed to be 92 mm in the length class of 90-100mm.  $L_c/L_{50}$  calculated from the study is lower than  $L_m$ , implying that individual fish of this stock are vulnerable to fishing before reaching first sexual maturity.

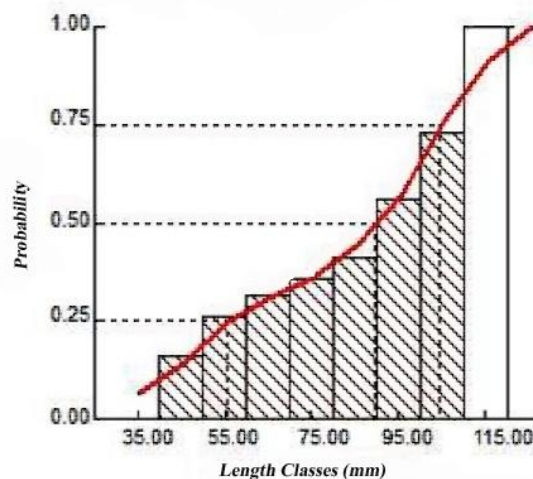
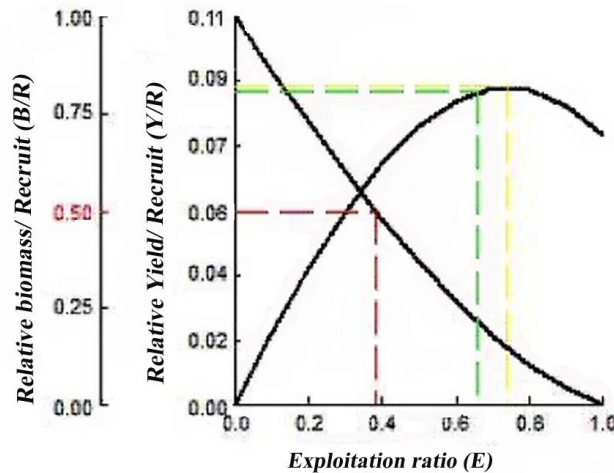


Fig. 4. Probabilities of capture pattern of pooled population of *Sahyadria denisonii*.

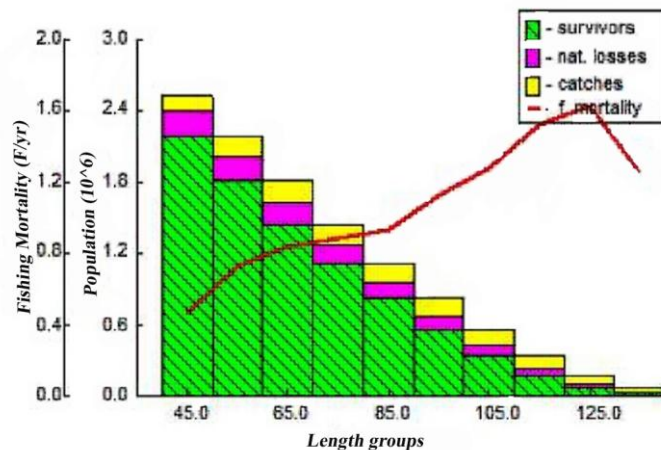
### Yield-per-recruit and biomass-per-recruit

The estimates of probabilities of capture and length at first capture values were used as inputs for relative yield-per-recruit of Beverton and Holt ( $Y/R$ ). The  $L_c/L_{\infty}$  and  $M/K$  values used for  $Y/R$  analysis were 0.567 and 1.0375 respectively. The relative yield per recruit and biomass per recruit in *S. denisonii* is depicted in Fig. 5. The relative yield per recruit reached the maximum at an exploitation rate of 0.737( $E_{max}$ ).

It may be noted that the present exploitation rate ( $E=0.60$ ) does not exceed the maximum exploitation rate ( $E_{max}=0.737$ ). The values of  $E_{0.1}$  and  $E_{0.5}$  were estimated as 0.656 and 0.383 respectively. The results of length based virtual population analysis showed that fishing mortality ( $F$ ) increased to a maximum of 2.40 at 120-130 mm size (Fig. 6). This indicated that catches increases substantially from 50-60 mm and attained maximum at 110-130 mm size groups (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 5.** Relative yield per recruit and biomass per recruit of pooled population of *Sahyadria denisonii* ( $E_{0.5}$ ,  $E_{0.1}$ ,  $E_{max}$ )



**Fig. 6.** Length based virtual population analysis of pooled population of *Sahyadria denisonii*.

### Discussion

*Sahyadria denisonii*, an endemic species from southern India is categorised as endangered (EN) in the IUCN Red List. The results on the population characteristics of the species may help in the formulation of suitable conservation management programmes for the protection of this threatened fish. The maximum length recorded during the present study was 140 mm, which is greater than the earlier record (136 mm) from the River Valapattanam (Mercy et al. 2013b), 110 mm from the River Chaliyar (Solomon et al. 2011) and 107 mm from River Kariangode (Mercy et al. 2013c), but lower than the 156 mm from River Kanjirampuzha (Kurup et al. 2008) and 162 mm from River Chandragiri (Solomon et al. 2011). This is an indication of clear stock-specific population structuring of *S. denisonii* between rivers in the Western Ghats.

These results are in agreement with John (2009) in *S. denisonii* and Raghavan et al. (2011) in *Tor khudree* (Sykes 1839) from the Western Ghats of Kerala. These growth differences can be attributed to differences in environmental factors, particularly water temperature and food availability in rivers (De Silva et al. 1985; Froese 2006; Ahamed et al. 2012).

According to Froese (2006), growth in fishes is not constant throughout their life; young fish grow rapidly and then growth decreases as the animal advances in age until there is no further growth. In the present study, growth curves showed that the population comprised of a single cohort originated during December-February (Fig. 2). However, it has been reported that *S. denisonii* spawn mainly during November- February (Solomon et al. 2011; Mercy et al. 2013a; Sajan 2015). It is expected that the major recruitment peak (March-June) detected in this study should correspond to the major spawning season. The estimated  $L_{\infty}$  (158 mm) and  $K$  ( $0.8 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) were similar to many other cyprinid species. In the present study, *S. denisonii* showed rapid growth rate ( $0.8 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) similar to  $0.8 \text{ year}^{-1}$  in *Osteobrama bakeri* (Day 1873) reported by Euphrasia (2004), but lower than  $0.81 \text{ year}^{-1}$  in *Labeo dussumierii* (Valenciennes) by Kurup (1997),  $1.19 \text{ year}^{-1}$  in *Dawkinsia filamentosus* (Valenciennes 1844),  $1.06 \text{ year}^{-1}$  in *Rasbora daniocnuius* (Hamilton 1822),  $0.93 \text{ year}^{-1}$  in *Amblypharyngodon melettinus* (Valenciennes 1844),  $0.96 \text{ year}^{-1}$  in *Esomus thermoicos* (Valenciennes 1842) by Wijeyaratne and Perera (2001) and  $0.97 \text{ year}^{-1}$  in *Puntius carnaticus* (Jerdon 1849) by Manojkumar (2007). The high growth co-efficient ( $K$ ) value indicated that, *S. denisonii* attained asymptotic length ( $L_{\infty}$ ) rapidly which is in agreement with Pauly and Munro (1984) and Tsikliras et al. (2013), that species having shorter life have higher 'K' value and reach their  $L_{\infty}$  within one or two years.

On applying the average growth co-efficient ( $K$ ) estimated by ELEFAN-I, *S. denisonii* attained an average length of 88.15, 126.61, 143.9, and 151.66 mm at the end of 1, 2, 3, 4 years respectively. *Sahyadria denisonii* was found to exhibit fastest length increment during the first year of its life similar to many other cyprinid species. In the present study, the age group of captured fish ranged between one to three years, but the dominant group belonged to the first and second year class. Based on the present results, majority of *S. denisonii* recruited to harvestable fishery for ornamental fish trade fall in the length class  $\leq 80$  mm, and it is apparent that the exploited stock invariably belonged to the first year age group. Thus *S. denisonii* experienced harvest pressure in the River Valapattanam. In the present study life span of *S. denisonii* was found to be 3.75 years, while Kurup et al. (2008) estimated longevity as 6.65 years in River Kanjirampuzha and 5-6 years by Anon (2014) in different rivers. According to Cha et al. (2004), differences in longevity of one species between different rivers are attributed to environmental factors primarily water temperature. In the present study, total mortality ( $Z$ ), natural mortality ( $M$ ), and fishing mortality ( $F$ ) were estimated as  $2.09 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ,  $0.83 \text{ year}^{-1}$  and  $1.26 \text{ year}^{-1}$  respectively. This high fishing mortality ( $1.26 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) over natural mortality ( $0.83 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) of *S. denisonii* indicated that this species is undergoing fishing pressure. Natural mortality is dependent on several biological and environmental factors, so precise estimation of it is often difficult (Pauly 1980; Cushing 1981). The estimated natural mortality rate of *S. denisonii* ( $M=0.83 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) is higher than that of *P. carnaticus* ( $M=0.54 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) as reported by Manojkumar (2007), and *Garra surendranathanii* (Shaji, Arun and Easa 1996) ( $M=0.63 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) by Sunesh Thamby (2009).

It is, however, lower than that of *P. ticto* ( $M=2.08 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) as reported by Mitra et al. (2011), and *O. bakerii* ( $M=1.2 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) by Euphrasia (2004). The reliability of natural mortality can be determined by the estimation of  $M/K$  ratio, which normally lies within the range of 1 and 2.5 for most fish (Beverton and Holt 1959). In the present study,  $M/K$  ratio was 1.0375, which is within the normal range and hence can be suggested that the natural mortality estimated for *S. denisonii* is reliable. The estimated fishing mortality rate of *S. denisonii* ( $F = 1.26 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) is higher than that of *P. ticto* ( $F = 0.49 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) as reported by Mitra et al. (2011), while lower than that of *O. bakerii* ( $F=4.18 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) reported by Euphrasia (2004), *G. surendranathanii* ( $F=2.22 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) by Sunesh Thamby (2009) and *P. carnaticus* ( $F=1.81 \text{ year}^{-1}$ ) by Manojkumar (2007).

According to the present study, the exploited population of *S. denisonii* from the River Valapattanam during 2011-2013 was mainly comprised of individuals ranging from 40-90 mm which come under the age class of  $0^+$  and  $1^+$  year. Issac and Ruffino (1996) and Prasad et al. (2012) reported that the capture of juvenile fishes before they reach their maturity or first spawning may affect the sustainability of stock. The value of mean length at which 50% of the population of female *S. denisonii* reaches first maturity ( $L_m$ ) is about 95-97 mm. Similar observations were found by Kurup et al. (2008), Solomon et al. (2011), Mercy et al. (2013a) and Sajan (2015). Thus, it is apparent that  $L_{50}$  calculated from the present study is lower than  $L_m$ , implying that individual fish of this stock are vulnerable to fishing before reaching sexual maturity. In the present study, the optimum length ( $L_{opt}$ ) for sustainable harvesting of *S. denisonii* was calculated as 117 mm TL.

In the present study, the relative yield per recruit ( $Y/R$ ) reached a maximum at an exploitation rate ( $E_{max}$ ) of 0.737 and with an increase in the exploitation rate,  $Y/R$  decreased. Over exploitation is considered to be a causative factor for the decline of freshwater biodiversity (Allan et al. 2005; Ahmed et al. 2005). According to Gulland (1971), a stock is optimally exploited when fishing mortality ( $F$ ) equals natural mortality ( $M$ ), or  $E = F/Z = 0.5$ . The results also showed that, the current exploitation rate ( $E = 0.60$ ) is higher than the optimum exploitation rate ( $E_{0.5} = 0.383$ ). Gulland (1971) suggested that a fish stock is optimally exploited at a level of fishing mortality that generates  $E = 0.50$ , which means that by using Gulland's rule, *S. denisonii* are being over exploited. The exploitation status of a stock can also be worked out by examining the  $Z/K$  ratio which as a rule of thumb should be '1' for growth-dominated fish and more than '2' for mortality-dominated (Balli et al. 2011). In the present study, the  $Z/K$  ratio is 2.61, which also indicates over exploitation of the stocks.

### ***Status of conservation and management recommendations***

Freshwater fish resources are viewed as open access free commodities that can be collected from nature (Raghavan 2010). *Sahyadria denisonii* stocks in the rivers of Western Ghats continue to be over exploited and there is a need to manage the stocks. The Department of Fisheries, Government of Kerala (India) issued a Government Order in 2008, restricting collection and exports and also proposed several management measures including quotas, gear restrictions, minimum catch size, and a seasonal trade ban (Mittal 2009).



However, recent studies indicated that these regulations were developed with minimum scientific input and offer little protection for this species (Solomon et al. 2011; Mercy et al. 2013a; Raghavan et al. 2013; Sajan 2015). The length at first maturity of *S. denisonii* was estimated at 81 mm for males and 92 mm for females by Solomon et al. (2011) and Mercy et al. (2013a). Based on these observations, it can be suggested that both males and females of *S. denisonii* must be allowed to grow to a size of 95 mm, so that they can spawn at least once before they are collected for trade. Collectors usually prefer to harvest smaller size groups (40-80 mm) of *S. denisonii* for aquarium trade so as to reduce mortality during wild collection, holding and transportation (personal observation). Export data from India during 2005-2012 confirm the export of juvenile *S. denisonii* of size range from 40 to 70 mm (Raghavan et al. 2013).

Thus, the protection of juveniles is probably the key factor for the sustainability of the resources, through the establishment of certain reserves or protected areas in the river to protect the spawning stock resources. It is difficult to recommend a specific gear regulation for *S. denisonii* alone since the main gear used in the Western Ghats rivers is a multispecies gear (encircling net/drag net). Therefore, implementation of specific mesh size regulation for *S. denisonii* alone is complicated. Hence, the community-based participatory management approach may be suitable for the sustainable aquarium fish trade. As a conservation measure, a seasonal closure of this species fishery was implemented based on the assumption that *S. denisonii* breed during the month of June, July and October (Kurup et al. 2008). Recent studies recorded that the breeding season of *S. denisonii* extended from October to March (Solomon et al. 2011; Mercy et al. 2010; 2013a; Sajan 2015), so the current seasonal closure as a conservation policy is therefore miscalculated (Raghavan et al. 2013).

Illegal fishing such as dynamite fishing has been banned vide the *Travancore Cochin Fisheries Act* of 1950 (Government of Kerala, India), but there is very little or no enforcement from the authorities concerned (Solomon et al. 2011) and thus the practice continues to exist even inside the protected areas in the Western Ghats region (Abraham and Kelkar 2012). Recently, the Government of Kerala has passed the *Kerala Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Act* (2010) without any focus on the conservation and sustainable use of indigenous freshwater fishes for aquarium trade. It is also recommended that, stock wise river ranching of captive bred young ones of *S. denisonii*, similar to that described in Ogale (2002) and Basavaraja (2011) may be established in the Central and Northern Western Ghats. The establishment of certain areas in each riverine habitat as sanctuaries, protected areas (PA's), or no take zones in the Western Ghats has high importance for conservation of many endemic species of freshwater fishes.

## Conclusions

From the results of the present study, it can be concluded that the stock of *S. denisonii* is over exploited. The present study provides valuable baseline data on the age, growth and population of *S. denisonii* that would be useful for fishery biologists to propose adequate policies for the sustainable management of this highly important species of the Western Ghats of India.

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