

An eel or a snake - forget it - it is a tasty fish

Gangetic mud eel or *Monopterus albus* or more commonly Cuchia is a tropical fish species widely distributed across the southern and southeastern parts of Asia. Largely owing to the elongated, slimy and compressed body, greenish or chest-nut brown body color and slithering movement, it looks more like an eel or a snake. Unfortunately, it is neither an eel and a snake, but it belongs to the family synbranchidae of the order synbranchiformes, which means although these creatures may resemble eels or their brothers, they are not related to true eels; and understandably far-placed animal very distant from the snakes.

They inhabit freshwater and brackish water and found in shallow, well-vegetated water and mud.

Mucky mud holes in shallow beels, ponds, and boro paddy fields are their favorite hang-out places. They can live in holes without water with the help of respiratory organs. They pass the entire summer in holes but sometimes coming out from the hole to take oxygen. While in the hole, they keep mouth position in a straight upper position and soon slides back completely with the slightest citing of any enemy. Unlike them, his many close relatives prefer spending their lifetime hiding in caves. The mud eel is a carnivorous and nocturnal prefers animal-based food like small fishes, mollusks, prawns, aquatic insects, small frogs, and worms, etc. Observation by onlookers say they sometimes crawl through the field and rice field bunds to the nearby locality in search of food at night, their mucky trail can be discerned by experienced eyes.

As a food, this fish is very tasty, nutritionally rich with medicinal value and is appreciated throughout its distributional range. Although it has quite a large economic demand and plays a unique role in socio-economic welfare, the populations of this freshwater eel are declining at an alarming rate from the natural water bodies due to overfishing, deterioration of water quality attributed to heavy use of agrochemicals in the rice field, and the loss of habitat.

Apart from the generic nets and traps, rural people of Bengal have a very unique way of catching this fish with frogs as bait held near the hole. A sound created in the water attracts Cuchia to grab its prey and it has to be lifted out from the hole in a single shot after it is trapped. However, it is one of the many indigenous techniques and gears people used to catch Cuchia. Mostly inspired by natural history and applying the insights from traditional knowledge, diverse tools and methods have been employed, e.g., wounding by spears, knives or sickles, stupefying fish by ichthyotoxic plants, using bamboo traps, hooks, and light fishing. The rich repertoire of human technology is a demonstration of indigenous means of natural resource management that



assimilates the information from natural history, the wisdom of hunting and gathering tools and its local resources base; and most importantly, it underscores human ingenuity

Source: S.M.Galib, bdfish.org

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