

## KERALA

# How these Kerala fishermen are proving that using square mesh cod ends helps in sustainable fishing

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## **A boat operator from Vypeen in Kochi leads the charge in popularising the method that has proven to be effective in reducing juvenile fish catch**

At a time when concerns grow deeper and discussions louder on how to find a way out of the corner the fisheries sector has painted itself into, a lone fishing boat operator from Vypeen has shown courage to take the plunge into what initially appeared to be a sea of uncertainty.

N. S. Suresh is now coaxing more trawlers to shift to square mesh cod ends in place of the traditional diamond mesh ones. A cod end is the tapering end of the trawl net where fish is aggregated as the net is dragged through the waters and hauled in.

The square mesh cod ends, with which experiments began in Kerala in the mid-1990s under the ICAR-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (CIFT), allow juveniles to escape in larger numbers when the net is hauled through the waters and pulled in as the shape of the mesh does not change or constrict itself. However, diamond meshes shrink considerably during trawling and prevent juveniles from escaping, says a CIFT scientist, explaining the advantages of the square mesh variety. Though the experiments had started in Kerala, Gujarat was the first State to make square mesh cod ends legal in 2003.

It was in August last year that a group of scientists approached Mr. Suresh with a suggestion to try out the new cod end. "It was a difficult choice", says Mr. Suresh who recalls how his workers initially resisted the idea for fear of drop in catch. But Mr. Suresh put up a brave front and persuaded them to stick to the new type. It was the shrimp season and apprehensions were palpable.

As it turned out, the first venture was a total failure. However, it was not the failure of the new cod end as other boats too were seen returning virtually empty-handed. The experience shook the confidence of the workers, but they still agreed to go ahead with the new gear.

They went out on the second trip and came back with a rich haul. They were in for a surprise when they compared the size of the shrimps in their boat with others. The shrimps caught in square mesh cod ends were relatively bigger and fetched a marginally higher price than those from other boats. The experience has since cemented Mr. Suresh's confidence.

## Better fuel economy

He points out that deploying square mesh cod ends also results in less drag on the boats, which in turn brought about a saving of 1.5 to 2 litres of diesel per fishing hour. “We are able to cover more waters using less fuel,” he says.

The square mesh cod end assessment was made possible with the support of In Transition to Marine Stewardship Council, London, executed by WWF India.

The new code ends is an answer, at least in part, to the problem of juvenile catch. While the bulk of the juveniles are trapped accidentally, there are instances of fishers making exclusive attempts to catch juveniles forced both by a fish drought and the roaring demand for juveniles from fishmeal factories.

Catching juveniles results in insufficient stocks being left to survive to grow and spawn, a big threat to long-term sustainability. The situation prompted scientists at ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute to come up with minimum legal size (MLS) for commercially important species to be caught and retained.

Sunil Mohammed, who recently retired from CMFRI, says the Kerala Marine Fishing Regulation Act was amended to make catching fishes below their legal size illegal. But MLS cannot solve the problem as it may only help punish the offenders, while measures such as adoption of square mesh cod ends can be a major step towards conservation.

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