

Unusual SRS in South Asia

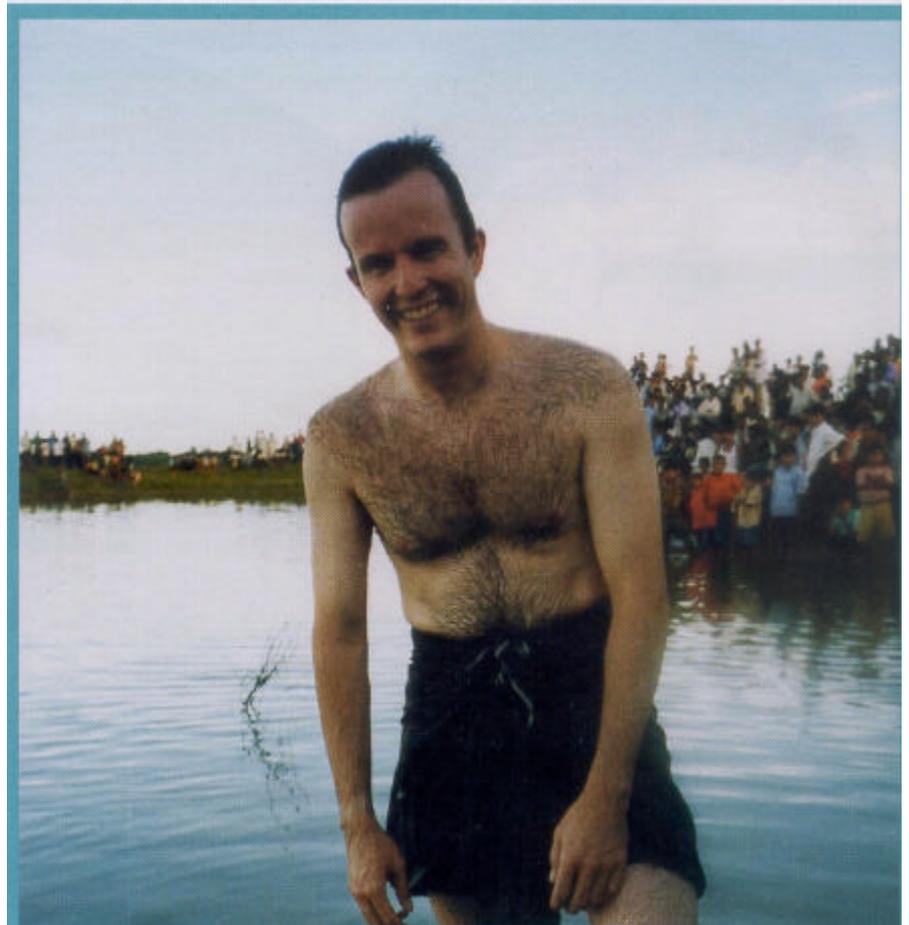
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During meetings between all project researchers it has become apparent to those from India and Bangladesh that the communities from Southeast Asia eat everything!

Traditionally West Bengal (the area of India being studied in this project) and Bangladesh are culturally high-volume fish eaters, however, the range of aquatic organisms consumed in Southeast Asia is obviously greater than in South Asia. Hindus will eat snails and mussels, but even the poorest Muslims avoid eating molluscs and amphibians. They will all use snails to feed livestock and this provides a useful livelihood activity for poor women and children. However, in October this year a very unusual self-recruiting species was spotted in the muddy waters of a community pond in Purulia, West Bengal.

Mahatma Ghandi's Birthday (2nd October) is a national holiday in India and is celebrated in different ways across India. Villagers surrounding Kumari Dam in Purulia come together for musical and cultural events, including riding a floating bicycle through the village pond, live music played from a raft in the pond and a duck catching contest. Strange sights indeed in any pond, but this year the 30 men who paid 3 rupees each for a chance of catching the one prize duck included a unusual specimen - a very white man! Anton Immink (Co-ordinator for the SRS project in India and Bangladesh) joined the event for a bit of fun and a chance to increase rapport with the villages. "I was the fastest swimmer out, but after 30 minutes of trying to corner one duck, it was evident that I was low down on the list for duck catching ability" slurred Anton, breathless in defeat. The lucky event winner certainly got his money's worth and hearty meal that day. The event was watched by hundreds of local villagers, but fortunately Anton could get into and out of that 'lungi' in peace.

As mentioned earlier, fish eating is a large part of Bengali culture. Many SRS species are highly sought after. In recent surveys villagers have highlighted the



decline of many indigenous species. This reduction has come about as a result of changes in farming practices, national fisheries policy and many factors not directly related to fishing for example increased road building in Bangladesh. However, people still find many species in abundance at different times of the year. At the market level, it is interesting to note differences in the way SRS and cultured species are marketed. Larger, often cultured, fish are sold by weight, but smaller fish, mostly SRS, are sold by volume or number. That is, smaller fish are sold by the handful. Also fish are sold in a particular area of the food market in South Asia, whereas in Southeast Asia there is much more mixing between all foodstuffs in the market.

But it is important that a significant percentage of these small fish and other

aquatic organisms never reach market and may never be sold for human food. The picture on page 10 shows just what we are working for. This young boy has been removing small fish and shrimp from the net being used to remove large fish from this well-managed aquaculture pond in Bangladesh. The number of SRS within the net is negligible, but between the fibres SRS are available for him to pick. He has collected about 20 specimens in a small plastic bag that will provide his family with a good meal today. The second photograph (page 11) shows two women picking snails from the bottom of a pond. These snails will not be eaten, but will be used to feed ducks. The women will feed their own ducks for a few days for this hour's labour and will sell some to a local duck farmer to provide a little more household income.