

22. RARE OCCURRENCE OF SUNFISH *MOLA MOLA* (LINNAEUS)
FROM THE COASTAL WATERS OFF VISAKHAPATNAM
(BAY OF BENGAL)

(With a photograph)

The occurrence of sunfish in any sea is a rare event. It is so rare that even fishermen engaged in fishing throughout their lives find it totally strange when they come across one. On 6 May, 1986, a local fisherman reported to the Zoology Department of the Andhra University that a very strange looking fish was part of that day's catch. The local fisherman community had not seen the likes of it ever before. It turned out to be a sunfish, more specifically, *Mola mola*.

The occurrence of *M. mola* was first recorded in Indian waters by Khan (1975) from the Arabian Sea, near the Bombay coast. Earlier, Deraniyagala (1944) recorded one specimen from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) waters. There were some other reports of the occurrence of allied species (*Ranzania*, *Masturus*) of Molidae from the Arabian Sea by Kulkarni (1953), Chhapgar (1964) and Khan (1975). So far, *M. mola* has not been reported from the Bay of Bengal and the present finding is a matter of biological significance.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISH

Morphometric characters:

Total length	912 mm
Standard (preclaval) length	730 mm
Body depth	632 mm
Head length	280 mm
Eye diameter	55 mm
Snout length	130 mm
Length from tip of snout to origin of dorsal fin	630 mm
Length from tip of snout to origin of anal fin	640 mm
Length of dorsal fin	490 mm
Length of anal fin	480 mm
Length of pectoral fin	130 mm
Length from tip of dorsal fin to	

tip of anal fin	1350 mm
Vent diameter	40 mm
Length of gill opening	60 mm
<i>Meristic characters:</i>	
Dorsal fin rays	15
Anal fin rays	13
Pectoral fin rays	12

The clavus was too thick to count the caudal fin rays.

Identity of the fish. The fish had all the characters of *M. mola*. The body was typically truncate without a caudal peduncle. It was laterally compressed with high dorsal and anal fins being situated far behind on the body. Pectoral fins were small and situated at the middle on the sides of the body behind the head. Pelvic fins were absent. Colour of the body was grey with silvery shade on the ventral side and dark shade on the dorsal side and fins (Photo. 1).

Very little is known about the life of sunfishes. There are some general accounts which state that they are oceanic and epipelagic. The inference was drawn because of the usual sighting of these fish basking in the surface waters, far away from the coast. It is possible that such basking fish are ill, riddled with parasites (Harbison 1987) or old. Young fish were found to be "active and alert" (Fraser-Bruner 1951). Harbison (loc. cit.) and his team of workers observed the swimming behaviour of *Masturus lanceolatus* (Molidae) at close quarters at a depth of 670 m. The graceful sculling movements of the fish at that depth, where they were more common than at the surface, and the relationship with certain type of food organisms like ctenophores and medusae, show that the natural habitat of the fish is meso-

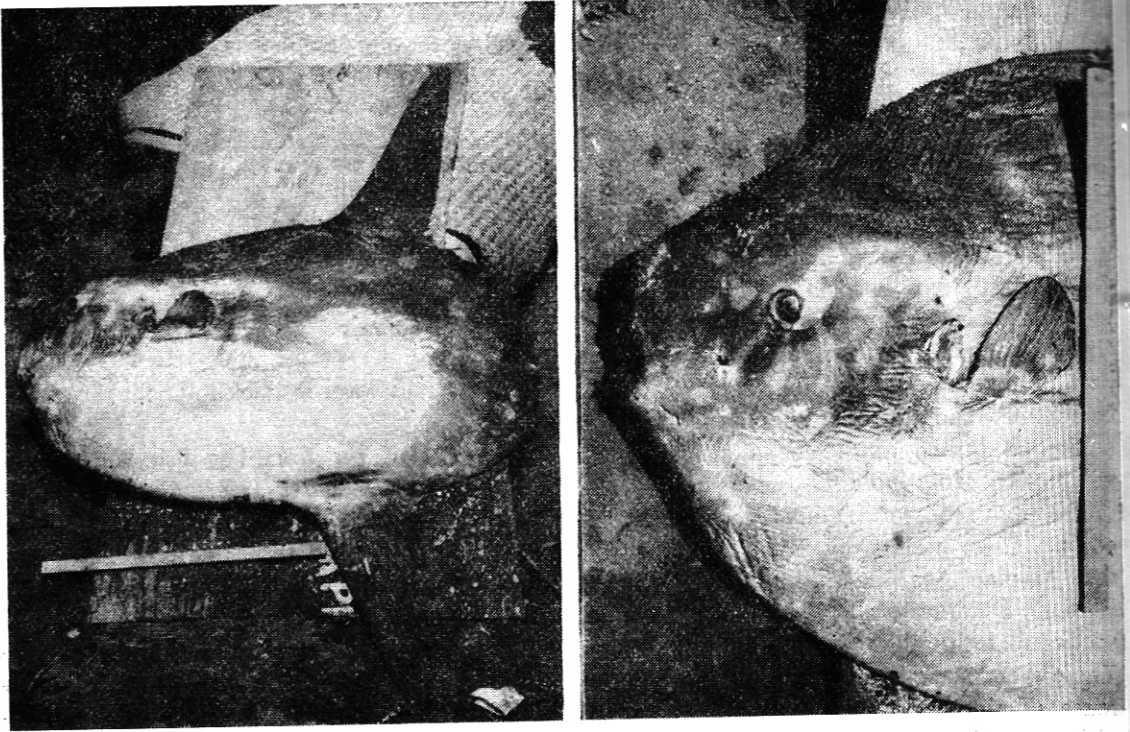


Photo. 1. Sunfish *Mola mola* (L.)
Left: Entire fish; Right: Anterior region enlarged (Scale = 500 mm).
(Photos: B. Ram Bhaskar)

pelagic rather than epipelagic. Similarly *M. mola* was found to descend to a depth of 180 m (Harbison, loc. cit.).

The present specimen was also caught at a depth of about 200 m as reported by the fishermen. It was an unusual sight for the fishermen because they seldom cast their gear in such deep waters. Even on the few occasions when they do deep-sea fishing, the chances of a sunfish getting caught in their deep water gear (usually hook and line) are almost nil because of the alertness of the fish. These fish may be present in the mesopelagic regions in considerable numbers but they are

not well known because of negligible fishing in the region and that too by hook and line only, which may not catch the fish. It is not because they are not there but because we do not have the gear to catch them at such depths, that their appearance is such a rare event.

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MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

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