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CMFRI RECREATION CLUB
Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute

(Indian Council of Agricultural Research)

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Souvenir

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CMFRI Recreation Club
Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute

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**In Conversation with -
Dr.E.G.SILAS -
former Director of CMFRI
and Vice Chancellor, Kerala
Agricultural University**

In 1984, as students of M.Sc Mariculture course of the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, we were introduced to "World Fisheries" by none other than the world renowned fishery scientist

Dr. E.G.Silas, the Director of the Institute. As he spoke about the different oceanic resources, policies and fisheries commissions, we were enthralled by the depth of knowledge of this teacher. As days passed, the 'fear' we had for the Director of Institute slowly changed, there developed a bond between us and we started admiring him and he became a source of inspiration. We had opportunities to see the scientific versatility and vision of the distinguished personality. Two decade later, I was again privileged to be associated with Dr.Silas and I knew that I must know more about him and introduce him to the younger generation. On 26 th January 2004, I was honored to be with Dr. Silas and an attempt is made to introduce this eminent scientist.

V. Kripa

Dr. Eric Godwin Silas, born in Demodhra, Sri Lanka, did schooling at St.Joseph's High School, Trivandrum, completed intermediate from Madurai

American College and graduated from Christian college, Chennai. Right from childhood he enjoyed exploring the wild

School vacations were different for Dr.Silas. He used to go for exploring nature with his "exploration kit" for collecting and preserving fauna.

and he spent the vacations exploring the hill streams and collecting fishes. The interest did not stop there. Like a professional scientist he continued the study by identifying it systematically. To get expert opinion he traveled to Calcutta and met Dr.Sunder Lal Hora, the then Director of Zoological Survey of India. Dr. Hora could easily identify the scientific acumen of the 20 year old amateur naturalist. After the scientific discussions, Dr.Hora asked him to document his observations and submit it for publication which he ardently obeyed before returning back to Chennai. Later, when he was attending an endocrinology class in the college, his professor Dr. Joshua came to the class and informed that his article has been published. Thus, even before graduation, at the age of 21years, the first scientific paper was published.

Dr. Silas always followed the lesson he learnt from Dr.Hora –**document your scientific observations**. The personality of Dr.Hora enthralled him so much that he registered for Masters Degree in Science through research under this eminent personality. With this research experience he was allowed to register for Ph.D individually **without a guide** and he submitted the thesis to the Madras University within three years in 1953.

During the period 1948 to 1953, Dr.Silas traveled extensively trying to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. He did not bother about the facilities or the hardships. He stayed with tribals and fishermen and collected fishes from Gujarat to Kanayakumari, along the Western Ghats and studied the Ichthyofauna of the hill streams and contributed a wealth of knowledge on the species richness and diversity of Indian fish fauna. During one such expedition, while collecting fish from Willington Reservoir, Junagad with written permission from the authorities, he was arrested and was forced to leave the fishes back to a stream. Within a period of 5 years, from his collection of Indian fishes he was able to contribute 35 scientific publications embodying Revisions of families and genera of fishes, describe new species and contribute substantially to Hora's

"Satpura Hypothesis". In 1951 he presented a scientific paper in the International Symposium on Organic

Evolution on insular speciation of fishes.

A brilliant student, Dr. Silas was the recipient of national and international scholarships like the fellowships from National Institute of Science of India, New Delhi and Full Bright and Rockefeller Post doctoral Fellowship from the US Education Foundation in India. With these and the support from his parents he was able to pursue his studies and explorations which were close to his heart.

Getting a job did not bother Dr.Silas. Before getting his first permanent job as a Marine Biologist in erstwhile Central Marine Fisheries Research station, Ministry of Agriculture, Govt. of India in 1963 he served as an honorary scientist and as curator/ Registrar of Bombay Natural History Society, which gave him the opportunity to be associated with famous scientists of the country. As curator he was privileged to work with Dr.Salim Ali and Humayun Abdulali. His Post Doctoral work in the USA was with Dr. Carl L.Hubbs. He has also served as the Pool Officer under CSIR at CMFRI Mandapam.

A "vagabond naturalist", but with extreme discipline, Dr.Silas traveled extensively trying to satisfy his intellectual curiosity.

At Mandapam he started work on tunas, a group which was not touched on at the institute. He wanted to go through "unfrequented roads", face challenges and discover new things. He was never satisfied with superficial information. To get more information about this resource he went to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands along with a team led

by late Dr.S.Jones. By participating in expeditions in the oceanic waters, Dr. Silas contributed a wealth of information on the Scombroid resources. Later, he worked on several aspects of marine sciences. Answering to the question on his favorite branch of marine science, Dr Silas said that like tunas, planktology was also one of his preferred subjects and through research guidance to scholars it was possible to learn more about the richness and diversity of the country's marine plankton resources and the trophic link .

The ocean "garbage picker". Oceans have always fascinated Dr.Silas and he used to collect as many samples as possible which earned him the nickname *Chavaru perukki*

Dr.Silas has participated in several ocean going cruises. The International Indian Ocean expeditions on board R.V. ANTON BRUNN, and the cruises on board the R.V.VARUNA is something which he enjoyed. His research did not stop with sample collection and quantification. Later in the lab, he used to sit and analyze the samples, identify them and document it. On one such occasion he could identify the different larval stages of Indian mackerel, one of the most important pelagic resources of the country. This is relevant because there were several lacunae on the breeding grounds of this resource.



Dr S.L.Hora, Dr.Salim Ali and Dr.Carl L.Hubbs, the famed fisheries scientist were the three great personalities who have inspired Dr.Silas. To think big, never to be bothered about marginal problems, to be farsighted and to have a vision for the future is something which he learnt through these relationships. When Dr. Silas was the curator of Bombay Natural History Society, Dr. Salim Ali was the editor of the journal. He values the association with Dr.Salim Ali an erudite naturalist whose talent for writing and editing were fabulous. So also, his affection and hospitality. Salim Ali had the gift of explaining in a few words the behaviour and life habits of a bird and Dr.Silas recommends that every scientist should possess a copy of "The book of Indian Birds" to appreciate the style in which it is written.

Considering the contribution made by CMFRI in developing manpower through post graduate education programmes on mariculture I asked Dr. Silas how the concept for Center of Advanced Studies in mariculture was conceived.

Dr.Silas said that from 1970's the institute had given a trust to maricul-

"I had a 'Vice Chancellor' with me, Dr. P.V.Rao", Dr. Silas said "he kept me informed about the functions of the educational programs and his support has to be appreciated"

2004

ture and within a few years several aquaculture technologies were developed and he realized that the institute needed a strong manpower on mariculture. To keep continuity of this expertise, he could visualize the need for quality manpower development. The proposal for CAS was prepared by him and it was possible to get the approval from ICAR, FAO /UNDP and the program was started in 1979. Dr.Silas vividly remembered the support he received from Dr.O.P.Gautam, DG, ICAR and Dr. Raghu Prasad; ADG and from Dr.Stevensons of UNDP. With financial aid worth a million dollars from FAO he was able to develop the facilities for the educational program. Another hurdle in this venture was the recognition for the course conducted by CMFRI. State Agricultural Universities did not have statutory provision to recognize degree programs of Research institutes and at this time Dr. Piley, the Vice Chancellor of Cochin University of Science and Technology open heartedly provided the support and it was agreed that CMFRI will conduct the course and look into all the academic work and Cochin University will award the degree. He recollected the earnest help rendered by Dr.P.V.Rao, Mr. John and other staff. Today, students of mariculture from CMFRI are heading several national and international aquaculture programs - something which became possible only through the farsighted-

ness of Dr.Silas.

Dr.Silas was capable of converting his creative ideas into workable projects with contribution from his team members. He was adept at mobilizing funds. Commenting on his work management, Dr.Silas said that he believed in the capacity of his scientists, students and other staff. The mutual confidence and thrust resulted in success in almost all the activities planned. He also believes that even when scientists do research management, they should devote at least one third of their time to individual research and must have their own contribution.

A researcher must be committed to the work. He must be selfless and must learn to work as a team with good rapport with his seniors and subordinates. Nothing can be done in isolation.

Dr.E.G.Silas



Commenting on the qualities essential for a researcher, Dr.Silas said - Each researcher must be dedicated and the research should have relevance to the society. A researcher must be committed to his work, must have the courage to own up mistakes, be creative and should keep updating his knowledge. He must be a good listener and be receptive. This will help to understand people and help to solve their problems.

In spite of his busy schedule and commitments Dr.Silas found time to refresh his mind through his hobbies - philately, photography, painting and gardening. He stressed the need for hobbies and relaxation. He said - "We should be able to develop detachment of mind from office work

once you leave the office and devote time to the family and hobbies which will help one to perform better”.

I need not list out the contributions of Dr.Silas- any student of mariculture and marine biology must have come across his publications. The special publications and bulletins of CMFRI which he produced through his team of scientists have served as reference guides to many scholars in planning their research programs. Beyond all these, the importance he gave for infrastructure development and facilities for conducting quality research is also visible from all the programs he planned and implemented. An invaluable contribution of his is the magnificent new head quarters building at Cochin and many of the laboratory building in Regional Centers. Another proof of his far sightedness is taking on the responsibilities of planning the operation and research programs of the Fishery Oceanographic Research Vessel SAGAR SAMPADA of the Department of Ocean Development, Govt. of India. Dr.Silas did all the ground work for developing the program of this national asset. He remembered with gratitude the splendid efforts put in by Dr.Alagarwami to assist him. From 1984 onwards this vessel has cruised in the Indian Ocean, seas around A&N Islands, Bay of Bengal and the Southern oceans providing facilities for multidisciplinary research involving almost all fisheries institutes and universities.

The inborn

It was a rare honor— a fisheries scientist to be the founder president of Salim Center for Ornithology and Natural history an institute under the Ministry of Environment and Forests — a position which Dr.Silas deserved.

intellectual curiosity of Dr.Silas is still not satisfied. He continues his explorations and observations. Through the E.G.Silas Foundation for Nature conservation, he organizes scientific programs to create awareness among children about nature and her wealth. His current activities are not restricted to the aquatic ecosystem alone. He is actively involved in studying the plant and animal genetic resources of the Western Ghats and has identified and documented 6 species of Myristicaceae (nutmeg) from the southern part of India. Apart from this, as Chairman of the Scientific and Technical Committee for planning the research programs of FORV SAGAR SAMPADA, he still continues to contribute to the development of Science and Technology in India.

Here I recollect the words of our Honorable President Dr.A.P.J.Kalam “ If you want to leave your foot prints on the sands of time, do not drag your feet”. Dr.Silas by his firm steps has evidently marked his foot prints in his sphere of activities.

Dr.Silas very emphatically often remarked “I earnestly believe that a Divine Grace has always protected me “. I conclude with the prayer that let the Divine grace continue to be with him always. The article gives just a glimpse of the great personality of a born naturalist, who as the Director of CMFRI during 1975 to 1985, played a pivotal role in uplifting this institute to international level.

