

## STILT FISHING IN KATHALUWA AND AHANGAMA (HABARADUWA)

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### ABSTRACT

Stilt fishing is mainly confined to a small part of Galle District, in southwestern Sri Lanka. Fishing is done with a rod and line while sitting on a cross bar tied to a wooden pole driven into the coral reef. Barbiess hooks, made by the fishermen, are without bait to catch spotted herring and small mackerel. The method has existed for about 50 years. After disputes between groups of fishermen over fishing rights, different areas were allotted to different groups. Each fishing reef is used only by fishermen from a particular village or group of villages. The fishery is managed by the fishermen. Craft and nets are forbidden, as are certain types of hook. However, the use by outsiders of small-mesh nets to catch fish approaching or leaving the reefs and the building of hotels close to stilt fishing areas threaten the fishery. These are threats which cannot be managed by the fishermen without government assistance. Regulatory measures are necessary if the stilt fishery is to survive.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Stilt fishing is special to Galle district and is mainly confined to Kathaluwa and Ahangama, two villages in Habaraduwa Divisional Secretaries Division which is the eighth largest of the 16 D.S. Divisions in Galle district. There are about 500 fishing families in the coastal belt of Habaraduwa D.S. Division but their standard of living is poor. The main fishing centres are Habaraduwa and Kathaluwa each of which consists of the villages shown in Table 1 which also shows the numbers of traditional and mechanised craft operating in the area. Inland fisheries are carried out in Koggala Lagoon and Koggala Oya for prawns but only on a small scale.

Table 1  
Numbers of fishermen in the fishing villages of Habaraduwa and Kathaluwa

Fishing centre	Fishing village	Number of fishermen	Number of traditional craft	Number of mechanised craft
Habaraduwa	Habaraduwa	127		
	Unawatuna	157	22	4
	Yaddehimulla	183		
	Talpe	108		
Kathaluwa	Koggala	699	10	-
	Ahangama	150	12	5
	Kathalugoda	89		
	Kathaluwa	276	20	8

Source: Investment Profile of Habaraduwa District Secretaries Division - Planning Division, Southern Provincial Council, Galle. (IPHDSD)

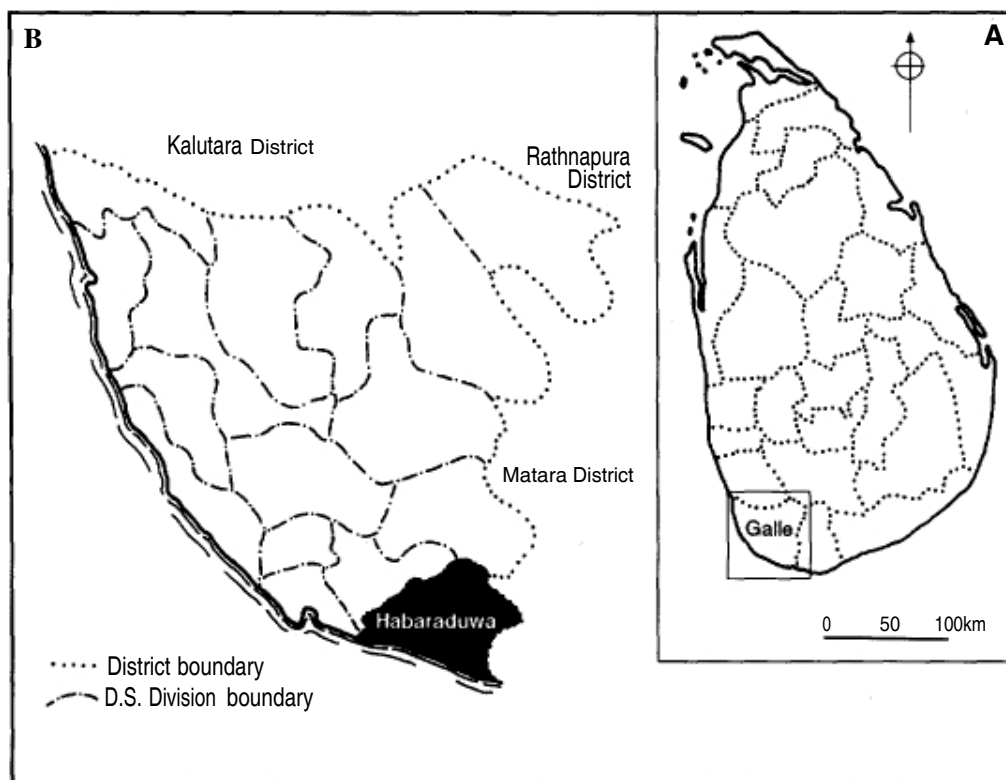


Fig 1. Maps to show the locations of Galle Province, Sri Lanka (A) and the District of Habaraduwa (B).

The following Fisheries Co-operative Societies (FCS) function in Habaraduwa D.S.D.

1. Kathaluwa F.C.S
2. Ahangama Piyadigama F.C.S.
3. Singha Fishing Village F.C.S.
4. Thalpe Kahawattagama F.C.S.
5. Duwa Malalagama F.C.S.
6. Peelagoda F.C.S.

## 2. STILT FISHING

The fishermen sit on a cross bar called 'petta' tied to a vertical pole planted in the coral reef and carry out rod and line fishing. Sometimes two or more stilts are joined together to form a fence or 'wata' so that more than one fisherman can fish at the same time. The fishermen hold the stilt by one hand while seated and carry out rod and line fishing with the other hand. They usually sit

against the wind. The stilt is made by tying two sticks on to a pole 3 – 4m long. These two sticks are tied at a height of about 2m. The free ends of the two sticks are tied to another stick which in turn is tied to the main pole to support the cross bar. This forms a triangular structure. One or more shorter sticks may be tied below the ‘petta’ to serve as steps.

The timber used for the stilt is domba (*Calophyllum innophyllum*) kaduru (*Carbera mangnans*) and kadol (*Rhizophora* sp) but the most popular variety used at present is alstonia (*Aistonia macrophylla*).

Table 2  
The main fishing centres used by stilt fishermen.

Fishing centre	Used by fishermen from	Fishing centre	Used by fishermen from
Andan		Hanagalawala	
Maraduwela	Koggala	Kudawala	Kathaluwa
Moderawella		Dombagahawala	
Debaagalpara	Waihengoda	Kithurannawela	Ahangama
		Gonagalpara	
Galbokka	Ahangakanda point	Aranwala	Aranwala
Goiyapana	Goiyapana	Denuwala*	Denuwala
Midigama*	Midigama	Kalukandat	Kalukanda

\* In Matara District adjacent to Galle District

## 2.1 History and techniques

The history of stilt fishing is not clear. According to the information gathered from elderly fishermen of the area stilt fishing started about 50 years ago after the Second World War. Earlier, fishermen fished from rocks that protruded above the sea surface. Since not enough such rocks were available for all the fishermen, some fishermen used discarded ‘iron poles’ or G.I. pipes to make stilts by planting them in the reef. They thought that only iron poles were durable enough to be planted in the reef. But since iron poles were scarce a few fishermen started planting pointed timber poles after making a hole in the reef with a crowbar. This was a success and other fishermen followed suit. These timber poles were more durable than the iron poles and could be shifted from one place to another easily because they were lighter. The stilt is usually driven about 0.5 – 1m into the reef. Two to three people are needed to drive the pole down. The distance between any two stilts is such that the lines of two adjacent fishermen will not get entangled.

The rod is the midrib of seasoned kithul (*Caryota urens*) which is thin, light and short (about 1.5m). The line is about half a metre longer than the rod and is tied to the upper end of the rod. Sometimes to extend the life of the pole preservatives are applied. The line used is of 0.5 mm nylon. Before the introduction of synthetic lines the fishermen used fibre made from pineapple (*Ananas sativus*) leaves.

The barbiess hook is made by the fishermen themselves though a few make them for sale. To make a hook, fine stainless steel wire of gauge 20 is cut into pieces about 3 – 4 cm in length. These pieces are placed in horizontal grooves made on a mould of squid shell. The mould is of two

rectangular halves which could be tied together to form a vertical main groove with many horizontal branch grooves. The main vertical groove is open at the upper end and closed at the lower end since the vertical groove does not extend to the bottom of the mould. After placing the wire strips in horizontal grooves molten white lead (refined lead) is poured into the groove from the opening at the top. The molten lead flows through the vertical main groove and spreads along the horizontal grooves in which the wire strips are placed. After the lead has solidified the two halves of the mould are separated by untying the elastic or string wound around them. The wire strips are separated and each strip is bent at one end to make a hook. The excess lead round each end of the hook is scraped away with a sharp knife. The bent end is sharpened and a tiny portion is kept free of lead at the upper end to tie the line.

The making of the hook is a skilled job. The size of the hook may vary according to the targeted species but the most common is about 2 cm in length (to catch Koraburuwa). When the hook is complete only the shaft is covered with lead while the bent end and the upper end are bare.

The main fishing centres are listed in Table 2. Stilt fishing used to be carried out at Unawatuna but due to the expansion of tourism and tourists bathing disturbing the fish shoals there is very little fishing now done in the area.

## 2.2 Targeted species

The main species targeted are ahalaburuwa (young koraburuwa), koraburuwa (spotted herring, *Herklotsichth punctatus*) and bolla (small mackerel).

The fishing season starts with the onset of the southwest monsoon (April—May) and extends till the end of the monsoon (September—October). The first species to settle on the reef is koralawa (*Allaretaforskali*) followed by ahalaburuwa and koraburuwa. Sometimes small mackerel species are associated with koraburuwa. In such cases the bolla stay below the koraburuwa. The hook has to be lowered through the upper koraburuwa 'layer' and hence the hook has to be heavier. The hook to catch koraburuwa is placed above the fish and constantly jerked to attract the fish. No bait is used. The fish is loaded into a bag tied to the waist of the fisherman. In earlier days bags woven out of coconut leaves were used. The present day bags are discarded polythene bags. When there are sufficient fish in the hag the fishermen leave the stilts to hand over the fish to the trader at the shore for sale and then return to the stilts. On a good day up to 1000 fish could be caught by one fisherman, depending on the biting rate. The foam produced by the waves breaking on the reef is said to increase the catch rate. Each koraburuwa could be sold for Rs.0.75 – 1.50 depending on the availability and the time of the day.

The fishing starts when the fish return to the reef or paraya after their nocturnal feeding to rest. Each fisherman usually fishes three times a day from about 5.30 to 8.30 am, 10.30 am to 12.30 pm and in the evenings from about 15.30 till dusk. The fish leave the reef at sunset. The reason why the fish come and stay at the reef for some time is not known. The duration of their stay also varies. According to some fishermen the fish stay for long periods, sometimes for a few years if they are not unduly disturbed. But they do not come to the same reef every year, and during the same season they may go to different reefs at different times. The fish have come to

Koggala this year after a lapse of about nine years.

A few fishermen plant their stilts beyond the reef to troll for bigger fish such as horse mackerel which follow the koraburuwa for feeding during their inward migration at dawn.

### 3. MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

At each fishing centre (or reef) only the fishermen from a particular village or group of villages fish (Table 2). It is evident that the areas have been designated to each group of fishermen after disputes which arose between groups of fishermen for fishing rights. According to the commission report on the Koggala Fishing Dispute (1973), areas and number of stilts have been allocated to two groups of fishermen from the same village, Koggala.

Before Independence a leading trader called "Renda Mahattaya" used to control each fishing centre, protecting the fish when they came to the reef by not allowing any prohibited practices. He used to buy the fish for sale and give part of the proceeds to the fishermen. He was assisted by the "Walle Patabendiarachchi" to solve any disputes.

At present the fishermen themselves manage the fishery. The following are prohibited:

1. Fishing with any kind of net
2. Use of foul hooks or Kahugama
3. Use of any craft
4. Bathing in the area when fish are present
5. Planting of stilts during the day time.

Rules No. 17, 18 and 19 of the Talpe Pattu Fishing Rules 1912 had prohibited the use of nets or Kahugama to catch koraburuwa in certain fishing centres. It is reported that before the introduction of synthetic nets the fish used to come and stay in the parayas more often and for longer periods.

The fishermen approach the stilts one by one so that the fish are disturbed as little as possible. Any fishermen can use a vacant stilt.

Stilt fishing is not only a fishing method – it has become a tourist attraction. There are some 'fishermen' who earn a living by posing for photographs.

### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The following regulatory measures seem to be necessary to sustain the fishery.

1. To prohibit the setting of small meshed synthetic nets across the migratory path of koraburuwa at dawn and dusk.
2. To ban bathing in the area when the fish are resting.

3. To control the building of tourist hotels close to stilt fishing centres since they are not only a hindrance to fishermen approaching the parayas but the bathing tourists disturb the fish.
4. Breaking of coral and use of explosives to catch fish should be stopped.