

FOOD AND FEEDING HABITS OF COMMON PONY FISH, *Leiognathus equulus* IN THE NEGOMBO ESTUARY

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The Common pony fish, *Leiognathus equulus* (Family Leiognathidae) is a popular food fish in the brackish water environments of Sri Lanka. It is an abundant species in the Negombo estuary contributing to the catches of variety of fishing gear including stake nets and encircling nets. However, very little is known on the biology of this species in Sri Lankan waters. As such, the present study was carried out in order to investigate its food and feeding habits in the Negombo estuary with an objective of contributing to the existing knowledge base of biology of fish fauna of Sri Lanka.

Although *L. equulus* is reported to be a strictly carnivorous fish, the results of the present study indicated that this species in the Negombo estuary feeds on variety of food items including blue green algae, green algae, diatoms, rotifers, gastropods, bivalves, nematodes, crustaceans, aquatic insects and detritus. During the rainy months the food spectrum of *L. equulus* was broader than that of non rainy months probably due to presence of variety of food items in the habitat. A change in the dietary composition with size was also noted. In smaller size groups detritus was the major food item while in large size groups the major food item was the animal matter.

The dietary composition varied with the rainy and non rainy seasons too. In the rainy season, the relative abundance of shrimps in the diet was higher than in the non-rainy month. The emigration of shrimps in to the coastal marine water during the rainy season may have resulted in an increased predation by *L. equulus*.

Therefore, the results of the present study indicate that although the gross morphology of *L. equulus* does not change with increasing size, a change in the dietary composition takes place with growth. Such a change may be of adaptive significance minimizing intraspecific competition.