



Lakshmi could probably collect seaweed in her sleep considering that she has been collecting seaweed since she was 10 years old. She is now 52. A very young 52. Lakshmi is a fisherwoman from the Gulf of Mannar region of southern India.

The Gulf of Mannar, a shallow bay on the southeastern coast of India, has over 3000 species including dugongs, sea turtles, and sea grasses. The fishing community along the coast depends on the Gulf's biodiverse waters for its livelihood. In 1986, a part of the Gulf, including 21 islands along the coast, was declared a marine national park, which, under

## PROFILE

### A very young 52!

Seaweed collector, Lakshmi, wants to leave behind a legacy of sustainable seaweed collection

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Indian law, means a no-take zone. Since the islands have been used by the fishing community for generations, seaweed collection and other livelihood activities continued for years even after the area fell under protection. It was only in the year 2000 that the regulations began to be seriously implemented.

Following the example of her mother, her sister and other women in the community, as a young girl Lakshmi began to go to the islands nearby to collect seaweed, learning to swim by watching the elders. Collecting seaweed was tough with no goggles, flippers or protective gear. "We used to just reach out, grope about and collect seaweed with our bare hands," says Lakshmi. "By the time we reached home, our hands would be cut up by corals. Imagine cooking or eating after this! It was very painful and the spices would make the cuts burn!"

When Lakshmi was a youngster, there were only about 50 people in the village who collected seaweed. They would hire a *catamaran* and go to the nearby islands of Krusadai and Moyal. The population of the villages kept growing and so did the number of seaweed collectors. Says Lakshmi, "About six years ago, we decided that we must regulate the seaweed collection. The seaweed was not as plentiful as before. Also, we had begun to face a lot of trouble from the forest department with the ban on entry into the national park." After the local politician and police spoke to the villagers about the situation, they decided to begin managing the resource. Today, in her village of Chinnappalam, collection is allowed only for 12 days in a month—six days at full moon and six at new moon. There is also a 45-day total ban on collection. Finally, should a person miss a collection day, no compensatory collection is allowed.

What about the future? Lakshmi says that the women seaweed collectors of her village are looking to see how they can work with the other villages and devise a larger seaweed management plan for the region. "At the recent meeting with scientists and ICSF, some ideas were discussed (rotating collection within the island so that each area is harvested only once in five months and so on). Currently only my village is following these self-imposed rules. We have to talk to all the women collectors across the region and see what will work."

"My daughter is married and lives elsewhere," she adds "so there is no one after me in my house to continue this practice, but there are other youngsters for whom we want to leave behind a legacy of sustainable seaweed use." ❧