

# **An Identification of Freshwater Species and Their Habitats in Ritigaha oya –A Tributary of Kelani River, Sri Lanka**

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## **Introduction**

Although Sri Lanka is a small island, it is known for its richness in biodiversity, and it is reflected clearly in the variety of inland natural ecosystems and high degree of endemic species. The exceptional hydrological system comprising of 103 river basins plays a significant role by nourishing wetlands which are invaluable in terms of biodiversity in the country. All these rivers have numerous freshwater species including the once indigenous to Sri Lanka. Wetzone streams harbour most of the species especially that are endemic to the island and it has already undergone local extinction during the last three decades due to loss of habitats.

Human modification of earth terrestrial surface for agriculture, industry, settlements, recreation etc, the current rate and extent of land use changes and over exploitation of resources are far greater than ever in history in Sri Lanka. This unprecedented changes in ecosystems cause the destruction and fragmentation of natural habitats. These encompass lot of negative impacts on the environment including serious threats on biodiversity.

A majority of the threatened freshwater fish species are concentrated in the major river basins of the wet zone and the water quality of these rivers and their tributaries are adversely affected by gem mining, sand mining and agro-chemical residuals (IUCN Red List 2007). Kelani River is one of the main hill country forested rivers which accounts for a great variety of freshwater species. The survival of these species faces great challenges due to detrimental anthropogenic activities. According to the IUCN Red List-2007, the lower reaches of the Kelani river basin in particular is affected by harmful industrial effluents and salinity intrusion as a result of over exploitation of water for human use and sand mining. Therefore, it is vital to study about the freshwater species and their respective habitats at local scale especially to identify the endemic and vulnerable species and thereby to facilitate the conservation measures. Exploration of the freshwater fish, which is in fact a tributary of Kelani river would be of great help to disclose the information about freshwater fish which were never been explored and made known so far.