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Snail Spurt: Sustainable Solutions

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The onset of the monsoon in Kerala comes flooding the social media and news channels with giant African snail menace and measures taken by authorities to tackle the issue. The giant African snails (*Achatina fulica*) emerge from aestivation during the rainy season and cause damages to crops with their voracious appetite. They may also weaken structures like cement walls and is an aesthetic nuisance as well. They act as vectors of rat lungworms, which cause eosinophilic meningitis. Their high fecundity and exploding population make things even worse.

Every monsoon, local bodies and NGOs come up with various measures to tackle the regional snail menace. People use baits like cabbage leaves, beer, fermented solutions and decayed vegetables and fruits to lure snails into traps. Then the snails are salted out, or sometimes copper sulphate sprays are used to kill them. People also employ random salting on snails seen in fields, which is detrimental to crops. All these activities are transient and often end soon after the monsoon.

Solutions to snail spurt need long term strategies that involve coordinated efforts from policymakers, scientists and local people. Clearing snails from local regions viz., panchayaths and municipalities would only lessen the issue for a short period, as snails from the neighbouring areas quickly populate the area. Participation of the local people is inevitable for the successful eradication of the species. The model of Ezhukone in the Kollam district in Kerala is encouraging. The ‘APJ Abdul Kalam Farmers and Producers Society’ provides incentives to

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those who join to kill snails in Ezhukone. Snail baits and manual collection are equally good to trap snails. They are found in moist soils, beneath plants, decaying organic matter and even on concrete walls. Snails lay eggs in the soil layer at a depth of 1 - 2.5 cm. Adequate training to volunteers regarding the habitat preferences of snails will make the eradication drive effective. A single snail can produce approximately 1000 eggs in a year (Vogler & Beltramino, 2021). Hence, thorough eradication and strict laws that prevent the introduction of snails through ornamental and timber trade routes are necessary.

Snails are rich sources of calcium and protein, which can be utilised for the benefit of people (Babalola & Akinsoyinu, 2009). In some areas, people have started using snail shells as a calcium supplement for coconut trees. Boiling for ten minutes kills the snail and rat lungworms. It helps to detach flesh from the shell. The snail meat can then be processed into animal feed for aquaculture and poultry (Diarra et al., 2015; Suresh, 2007). The shell can be used as a calcium supplement in agriculture and for laying hens.

Guidance on necessary safety measures in collecting snails helps avoid any infections while handling them. The use of gloves and masks would help. Avoid touching body parts with gloves contaminated with snail slime. Inspect vehicles and instruments used in snail collection to avoid snails getting transported to other places. The snail fight strategies have to be consistently employed over the years to eradicate the giant African snail.

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