

Growing Water Chestnuts (Singharas) At a Floating Farm on the Yamuna River, Delhi

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It's not often that you will meet someone these days who will sing praises of the Yamuna. But Mohammed Riazuddin, 55, surveys his crew bobbing up and down on perilous contraptions fabricated out of rubber tubes on the water, pulling at a floating mess of leaves. His dark, pitted face breaks into a bright smile as he says, "Log Yamuna ko ganda bolte hain, par hum to isi ke pas baithe hamare parivar ka pet chalte hain (People decry the Yamuna for its polluted water, but to me it is the provider of food for my family)." As he speaks, one of his workers pulls in a net full of burgundy-green fruit. Every kilo of the singhara (water caltrop or water chestnut) harvest will fetch Riazuddin Rs 40 at the wholesale market.

For two decades now, Riazuddin has farmed water chestnut in a private wetland fed by the Yamuna. Having come to the capital to try his luck from Bijnor in Uttar Pradesh, he promptly saw an opportunity in replicating the traditional business of most families back home. Today he is the proud owner of the 40-bigha holding at Rainy Well Thoka Number 13 in east Delhi, where with little competition and a good demand for the starchy edible seed, he has been able to experience the benevolence of a famed river.

Anyone who sees the men expertly manoeuvring their rubber floats in the sea of stalks and leaves will realise that harvesting water chestnut is an art in itself. Such expertise is hard to find in the capital, and Riazuddin brings in his workforce of around 10 men from Bijnor. "Back home, every house hold is into the singhara business. My father and grandfather did the same thing," says Pappu as he gathers the long stalks of the caltrop plant and plucks the nuts. He comes

twice a year with Satpal Singh, Jaipal Singh, Zaheer Hussain, Sher Singh and some others to work at the floating farm near Kishankunj—once at sowing time at the outset of the monsoons and then again between September and November at harvest time.

On good days, the men collect up to 800 kg of singhara, which are carted off by vendors and wholesalers from Ghazipur mandi. Each man earns Rs 250 for a day's work. It is quite a windfall for them, because, as Pappu says, "The rest of the year we work as labourers". However, the money is hard-earned. For one, they work half submerged in polluted water and there is no way of knowing what hazards lie beneath the muddy, leaf-strewn surface. There have been cases of snake bites, and in Bijnor, even deaths.

The Yamuna's alarming deterioration is obviously taking a toll on the business and making the job of these men a health risk. At the time of sowing Riazuddin uses a special compound, a white powder that coagulates the pollutants, which sink to the bottom, leaving fairly clear water on the top. The water chestnuts are then sown.

This year, says Riazuddin, his income will be hurt by a lower than usual yield. Pesticide-laced water from neighbouring fields flowed into his farm during the monsoons and contaminated his crop. Yet, unlike many others who live off the dying river, the greying Riazuddin refuses to think of the Yamuna's demise. "Our survival is dependent on it. It's a source of life for all of us from Bijnor," he says, as his eyes stray to the sacks of strangely-shaped fruit waiting to be hauled away.

200 New Species Discovered in Eastern Himalaya

A snub-nosed monkey that sneezes when it rains, a walking fish and a jewel-like snake are among more than 200 new species discovered in the fragile eastern Himalaya, according to a new report by WWF.

A report on wildlife in Nepal, Bhutan, the far north of Myanmar, southern Tibet and north-eastern India by The World Wildlife Fund said that discoveries in the past five years included 133 plants, 26 species of fish, 10 new amphibians, one reptile, one bird and one mammal.

"Some of the most striking discoveries include a vibrant blue dwarf 'walking snakehead fish', which can breathe atmospheric air and survive on land for up to four days, although moving in a manner much clumsier than a slithering snake. "The report details an unfortunate monkey whose

upturned nose leads to a sneeze every time the rain falls, and a living gem—the bejewelled lance-headed pit viper, which could pass as a carefully crafted piece of jewellery," the report said.

The snub-nosed monkey—or "Snubby" as they nicknamed the species—from locals in the remote forests of northern Myanmar, who said it was easy to find when it was raining because it often got rainwater in its upturned nose, causing it to sneeze.

To avoid the problem, snubby spend rainy days sitting with their heads tucked between their knees, the report said.

"These discoveries show that there is still a huge amount to learn about the species that share our world," said Heather Sohl, WWF-UK's chief adviser of species.