

5.3 The St Lucia Mullet Run

Historically, Lake St Lucia in northern KZN experienced a unique annual phenomenon known as the “mullet run”. During the months of April/May each year, large shoals (measuring up to 10 km in length) of adult flathead mullet would migrate southwards from North Lake and False Bay through South Lake and the Narrows to the mouth of the estuary and out to sea to spawn.^{1; 2; 3}

These dense spawning aggregations would often be accompanied by an abundance of predators, including Zambezi and blacktip sharks¹, pelicans⁴ and Nile crocodiles⁵. While the sharks would normally enter the estuary from the sea, the pelicans and crocodiles would follow the shoals of mullet down through the estuary narrows and congregate at the mouth. The resulting feeding frenzy was spectacular to observe, with mullet leaping in all directions, being hotly

pursued by sharks and crocodiles, while flotillas of pelicans would systematically herd the mullet into the shallows where they were easier to catch.

This phenomenon was believed to be very important ecologically, as it enabled the predatory species to fatten up and improve their condition before the onset of winter. The sheer abundance of mullet meant protection for many individuals in the dense shoals and the improved chance of successful spawning. It is believed that the mullet spawned at sea, in close proximity to the estuary mouth.² The fertilized eggs would hatch after approximately two days and the larvae remained at sea for at least two to three months before recruiting back into the estuary at 1-4 cm in length.⁶

Unfortunately, with the gradual degradation of the Lake St Lucia system, primarily through the reduced freshwater inflow,

periods of hyper salinity and extensive illegal gill-netting,^{7;8} the mullet run has dwindled over the years. During the 1990s, relatively little mullet activity was observed in the estuary Narrows during April/May⁹ and in 2002 the estuary mouth closed as a result of an extended drought in northern Zululand. Other than a brief six month opening following a storm surge event in March 2007, the estuary has remained closed to the present day. Although subsequent monitoring of Lake St Lucia’s fish populations has revealed the presence of some flathead mullet in the system,¹⁰ numbers are low and no evidence of the famous mullet run has been observed for nearly two decades.

Fortunately, relatively healthy flathead mullet populations still exist in the coastal marine environment and other KZN estuaries and, as a consequence, the species is not believed to be threatened.

St Lucia mullet run in the 1950s.



Photo: Provided by Ricky Taylor (original photographer unknown).