

Observed Predation on a Suckermouth Catfish (*Hypostomus plecostomus*) by a Water Monitor (*Varanus salvator*) in Bellanwila-Attidiya Sanctuary

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The Water monitor, *Varanus salvator* (Laurenti, 1768), known locally in Sinhala as “Kabara Goya”, is the largest lizard species in Sri Lanka (De Silva, 2006). The Water monitor is diurnal, and widely distributed throughout southeast Asia (Das, 2001; Deraniyagala, 1953; De Silva, 1996), where it is usually found in aquatic habitats such as swamps, ditches, streams, reservoirs, ponds, and mangroves.

The Water monitor is categorized as a scavenger which mainly feeds on animal carcasses (Daniel, 2002). It also actively predated on animals such as reptiles, fishes, small mammals, birds and their eggs (Deraniyagala, 1953; De Silva, 1996). Here we report an unusual feeding habit of *V. salvator*, in which an individual was observed preying on an invasive Suckermouth catfish, *Hypostomus plecostomus* (Linnaeus, 1758). This fish was accidentally introduced to Sri Lanka and is considered a threat to native fishes as well as a nuisance to local fishermen (Gunawardena, 2001).

Observations were made on 24 October 2005 in Bellanwila-Attidiya Sanctuary (altitude: 5 m; 6° 51' Northern latitudes and 79° 53' Eastern longitudes) in Colombo district of Western Province, Sri Lanka. A mature male water monitor (ca. 2 m in total length) was observed from a distance of ca. 3 m from 1448 to 1534 h. No disturbances were made while observing the monitor. The monitor emerged slowly from the nearby Katu Ela marsh with a Suckermouth catfish (ca. 50 cm in length) in its mouth (Figure. 1) which was half-dead (probably a by-catch of a local fisherman). The monitor then took nearly 46 min to swallow the fish (Figure. 2), afterwards slowly retreating back to the marsh.

The Suckermouth catfish is covered with thick armor plates and has many spiny fins which make it an unlikely prey candidate for *V. salvator*. In 2005, we observed a Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* attempting to feed on a fully grown *H. plecostomus* at Bellanwila-Attidiya area. The Pelican was unable to swallow the fish because of its erected spiny fins, which injured the throat pouch of the bird. Additional observations of predation attempts on this fish by *V. salvator* (Henkanaththegedara, pers. comm.) suggest that this may represent a common occurrence, and is worthy of documenting.

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Figure. 1: *Varanus salvator* with captured *Hypostomus plecostomus* in Bellanwila-Attidiya Sanctuary.

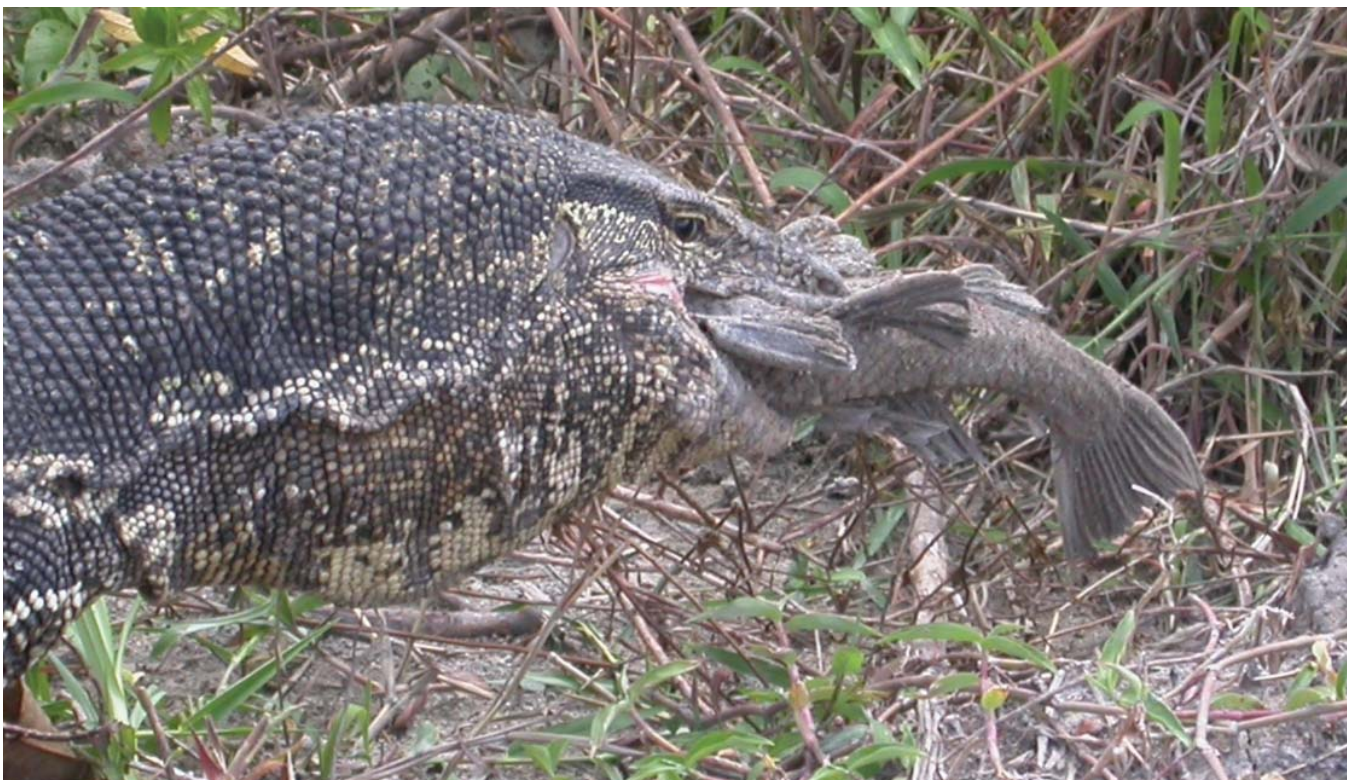


Figure. 2: *V. salvator* swallowing *H. plecostomus* in Bellanwila-Attidiya Sanctuary.

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