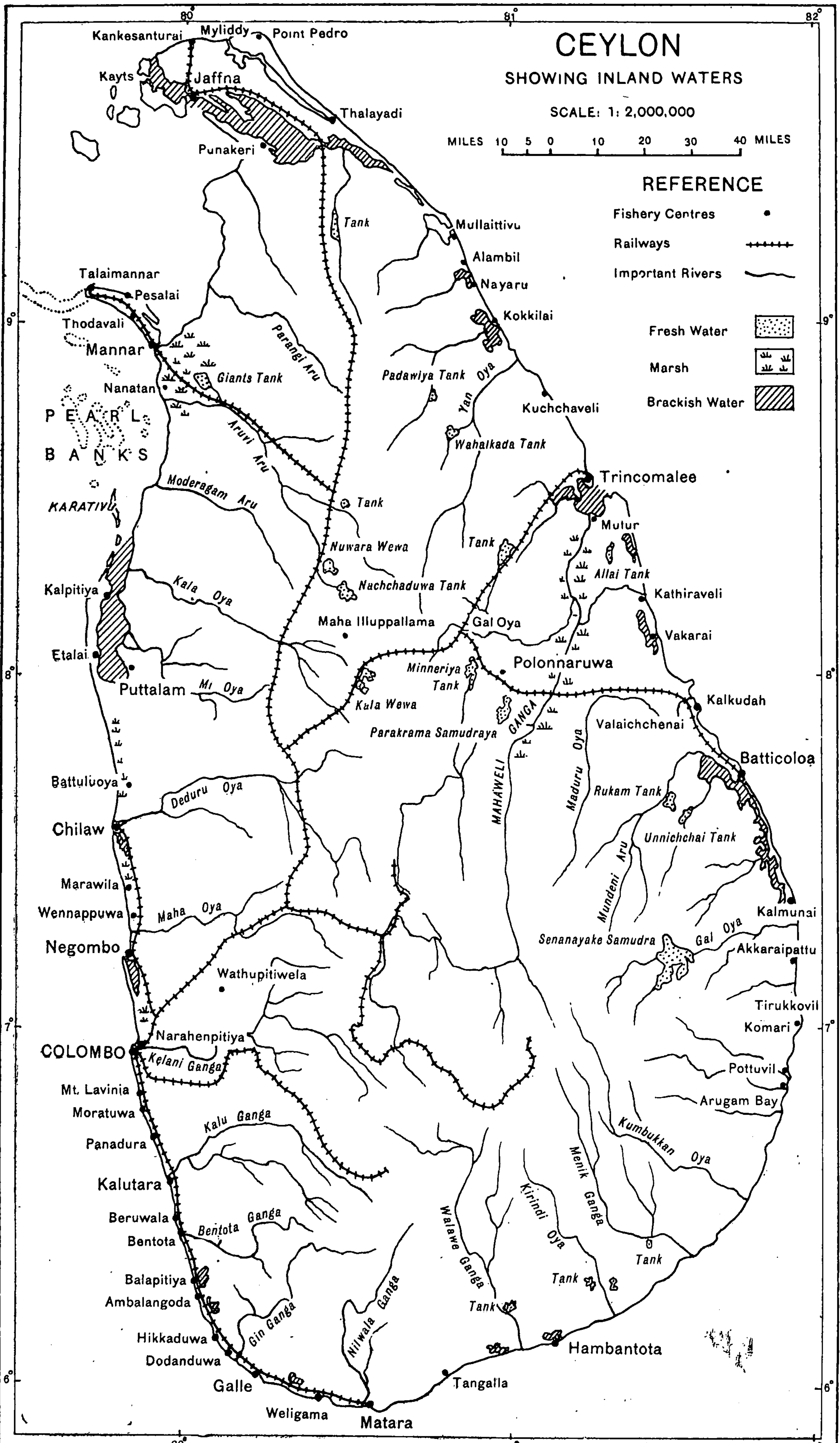


2. FRESH WATERS

Physical Features. The longer rivers have their catchment areas in the central hill country, and they radiate in all directions as they traverse the lowlands before reaching the sea. The upper reaches are characterised by rushing and cascading mountain streams, with numerous waterfalls. The rivers flowing through the Wet Zone are replenished by tributaries draining the lowlands, and hence they maintain a somewhat uniform flow into the sea throughout the year. Such accessory supplies received by rivers of the Dry Zone are very scanty and these rivers are therefore subject to great changes of water level as they respond quickly to varying supplies from rapidly drained hill country areas following heavy showers of rain. At times, these rivers may overflow their banks, flooding low-lying areas in their valley ; for long intervening periods they are reduced to a series of discontinuous pools or narrow streams along the sandy river beds.



The sharp rise and fall of river water levels necessitated the construction of reservoirs for conserving water supplies required to irrigate rice fields of the Dry Zone. About 10,000 of these reservoirs or "tanks" of varying dimensions, are in service mainly in the northern and eastern lowlands and they provide large regions for propagation of freshwater fishes. All the freshwater areas have been estimated to total 200,000 acres.

Indigenous Fauna. The fresh waters contain a fauna poor both in species and numbers as compared to those of brackish waters and the sea. The only economically important group are the fishes, some species of which are highly adapted to life in the changeable extents of water. These adapted fishes possess accessory respiratory organs by which they can live in polluted muddy streams or survive when migrating across wet land surfaces in search of new bodies of water.

Species of Cat-fish(1) and Snake-heads(2) are widely distributed in these waters and provide consistent supplies to fisheries. They are predatory in habit and are often captured on baited lines. The Fresh-water Shark(3) is actually a cat-fish which reaches a length of five feet under favourable conditions. Two species(4) of Snake-heads are commercially valuable and, if taken from clean waters, do not impart the muddy taste commonly ascribed to fresh water species. The Climbing Perch(5) is considered a delicacy when fished from clear waters. Prominent among fish living in fast flowing water courses of the hill country is the Mahsier(6). It is a popular game fish which is growing scarce. It is now rare for an angler to catch a Mahsier of 24 lb. as commonly recorded in the past. The Green Labeo(7) is another fish of mountain streams and it grows to a maximum length of 15 inches.

Apart from the edible fish there are several small and often brightly coloured species such as Barbs(8) and Rasbora(9) which are much fancied for rearing in aquaria. Certain restrictions on their export are applied to prevent depletion of stock in our rivers.

Exotic Species. The paucity of edible fish in inland fresh waters is responsible for the many efforts made from time to time to establish exotic species, especially those reputed to grow fast and provide cheap supplies of protein food. Rivers and other fresh water areas of the low country are supporting increasing populations of two species, the Giant Gourami(10) and the Snakeskin Gourami(11). Mountain streams around Nuwara Eliya contain breeding stocks of Rainbow Trout(12), and the Common Carp(13) is thriving in lakes and ponds of the hill country.

The fresh water Tilapia(14), a species native to East Africa and imported into Ceylon from Java in 1951, is firmly established with large breeding populations in both fresh and brackish waters sited up to an altitude of 3,000 ft. Its success can be gauged from the fact that it forms the largest component in fish landings from Polonnaruwa tanks (fresh water), Colombo Beira Lake (brackish water with low salinity) and Hambantota lagoons (high salinity waters).