

### PRIVADERSHINI S

On January 25, nine fishermen set off on a routine trip from Puthiyappa landing centre in Kozhikode. The winds and the waters were friendly and their trawler, Devasarthi, crested the waves valiantly. Three hours after they had lowered the net, they were 22 nautical miles off Koyilandi. At sundown, around 7 pm, they readied to receive the haul.

None was ready for the action that was in store.

"Unlike olden days the nets are no longer handled manually. The dragnet trawl is like a huge carry bag, it operates mechanically. Once lowered it lifts back automatically after a certain time," explains Nikhiljith MK, research student at CMFRI, Kozhikode. So, as they waited for the haul, they realised the net was taking an unusually long time to lift. The trawler engines too had begun to jitter. The nine began assisting the mechanical haul, but met with resistance. They realised they had caught something unusual.

Gradually a powerful, 6 metre long, giant fish emerged: the endangered whale shark. Delighted at a close encounter with the whale shark, they quickly realised that it had to be saved. Working together, undeterred by the powerful, struggling shark, they cut it out of the net, and using an ingenious system of pulleys combined with sheer musclepower, managed to release it back into the sea. A video of the effort, posted when they were still at sea, has been widely shared, and is being cheered by conservationists and shark scientists globally.

### Gentle and docile

Today, the team returned to Kozhikode. Discussing the rescue operation, Sandeep, one among the nine on board says, "It took us four hours to release the shark. We knew that this fish is a gentle, docile animal and lives on plankton and small fish. So were not afraid. But it was struggling out of water and flapped its huge tail out of distress. Two of us were injured in that."

Mahesh V Sagar, Scientist at CMFRI (Central Marine Fisheries research Institute), who was at the beach to meet them, explains the rescue process. "The net, which costs around a lakh, had to be cut in several places. Once free, the shark was pinned down and tied with a rope around her belly, so she could be lifted up using a pulley. While this was done the men pushed her over board." She was then gently guided back into the waters.

"These fishermen really need to be recog-



An endangered whale shark, accidentally caught while trawling, is returned to the sea in a dramatic rescue by nine alert Kozhikode fishermen. Meet the fishermen, scientists and conservationists who are protecting our oceans

## The WHALE SHARK who lived



**The young men and the sea** Above: The fishermen in the rescue act, below, with scientist, Mahesh V Sagar at Kozhikode.

◆ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

nised for the fact that they have not let the whale shark die. It is difficult to track what fishers do with endangered species in the middle of the oceans," says, Divya Karnad, Co founder InSeason Fish, a sustainable seafood initiative. She adds, "Despite a ban on shark fin export, there is a black market where disguised shark meat arrives. Enforcing any kind of marine protection is difficult. This is really a great conservation success story."

### Protected animals in sea

Mahesh says that in August 2019, fishers landed a whale shark at Ponnani harbour, explaining that many were not aware that this was an endangered fish and that killing it is a punishable act under Schedule 1 of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act. So, the CMFRI organised an awareness camp on International World Shark Day (August 30) last year on protected animals in sea, such as sharks and rays. A few months later, in November 2019 they held an awareness camp

### THE BIG FISH

Historically shark meat was eaten.

The distribution of whale sharks is fairly large in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, but its highest aggregation is in Gujarat.

The whale shark is protected under the Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act along with animals like the tiger, rhino and such. It has the highest level of protection. In Gujarat, the whale shark is compared to a daughter, who comes home during confinement, because they usually reach the waters of Gujarat to give birth to pups. This has been observed since 2004.

– Stakeholders' Meet on trade of Sharks and Rays, targeted at the fish merchants, discouraging them from buying shark meat.

"We have to stop the demand simultaneously otherwise such rescue acts will not take place. Fishers are now able to see this fish more often and recognise its value," says Mahesh.

"This is the second rescue act from Kerala. The first happened in 2018 from Malappuram. One of the main reasons for the decline of the whale shark is accidental killing. It is a very good move towards conservation," says Sajjan John, Marine Head, Wildlife Trust India. "The whale shark is the largest fish and its size is detrimental to its existence, as it runs into boats and gets entangled in fishing nets. When this happens, most fishers don't know about this species and bring it on board and land it. By that time the shark dies," says Sajjan adding that the Forest Department is cautious in filing an FIR for killing a protected species because the punishment is harsh – and affects livelihoods.

Divya's research, "what is driving fishery for sharks" points to the fact that historically shark was hunted for meat and its distinctive colour. Its size and skin pattern make it easily identifiable. "In fact, all languages have a separate name for the shark, which shows the communities' familiarity with the species."

