

Experts call for coordinated action to tackle illegal shark fishing and trade



Marine experts have called for coordinated action and increased awareness to tackle the illegal shark fishing and trade. An interactive workshop and panel discussion organised by ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) on Monday highlighted the importance of collaboration among various agencies to ensure the conservation of protected species in the wake of India's recent expansion of the list of sharks and rays protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972.

The experts who attended the meet felt the need to identify gaps in monitoring and enforcement. Habitat mapping, public awareness campaigns, gear modification, demarcation of conserved areas, AI-supported shark recognition devices, and an identification manual were proposed in the workshop. Shark fins in frozen form may often be difficult to identify by the enforcement agencies, requiring the need for a strengthened collective capacity among all agencies involved in fisheries management, trade regulation, biodiversity conservation, and enforcement, it observed.

Inaugurating the workshop, CGST & Customs Chief Commissioner Shaik Khader Rahman said joint training exercises and a real-time communication channel among customs, fisheries officers, coastal police, researchers and forest and wildlife departments are essential to enhance enforcement. There is a need to forge lasting understanding and actionable strategies between conservation and enforcement", he said.

Protected sharks are often caught illegally, with their fins smuggled into international markets due to high demand, particularly in East Asia. The amended Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 now gives the highest level of protection to 26 shark and ray species. In a landscape where illegal wildlife trade adapts quickly, enforcement should be enhanced with better training and closer coordination. Collaborating with CMFRI and other experts are essential to train front-line personnel in recognizing CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) listed elasmobranchs – whether in dried fin form, processed cartilage, or even whole preserved specimens, Rahman said.

"Fishing pressure and unregulated trade, together with other natural and anthropogenic factors like pollution and climate change have placed many shark species under threat of extinction", said CMFRI Director Dr Grinson George, who presided over the function. "Over 40 elasmobranch species are now listed under CITES I. This means that any trade involving these species must be accompanied by permits ensuring that their extraction from the wild is sustainable and not detrimental to their survival", he said, adding that effective conservation requires awareness among fishing communities, strengthening of monitoring and enforcement, and international collaboration.

At the same time, marine scientists cautioned that while implementing stricter conservation measures, the livelihoods of fishermen must also be considered. "Shark fishing is a primary source of income for many Indian fishing families, and enforcement should not disrupt legitimate fishing activities", said Dr Shoba Joe Kizhakudan, Head of Finfish Fisheries Division of CMFRI. CMFRI's latest publications on elasmobranchs, including a biannual shark science digest titled Kalpamatsya The Shark were released on the occasion. Union Fisheries Joint Secretary Neetu Kumari Prasad and Dr T M Najmudeen also spoke at the function. Apart from marine scientists, officials from state fisheries and wildlife departments, customs, coast guard, navy and Wildlife Crime Control Bureau along with representatives of exporters, and various NGOs took part in the discussion.