

Integrated conservation framework proposed to combat illegal Marine Wildlife Trade

Kochi, May 13 (UNI) Amid growing concerns over the illegal trade in marine wildlife species, experts and enforcement officials have called for an integrated conservation framework that combines science, policy support, enforcement and community participation to strengthen protection measures along India's coasts.

The call was made during a three-day national capacity building workshop hosted by ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute in association with Wildlife Crime Control Bureau and WWF-India at Kochi.

The workshop brought together 27 enforcement officials from forest departments, postal departments, railway protection force and police units from west coast states and the union Territory of Lakshadweep, along with scientists, conservationists and policymakers from across the country.

Participants stressed that tackling illegal marine wildlife trade requires coordinated action involving continuous monitoring, stronger stakeholder engagement and transparent dialogue with fishing communities.

Experts noted that misconceptions surrounding marine conservation, particularly after amendments to the Wildlife Protection Act, need to be addressed through awareness and collaboration.

The workshop highlighted alarming data on illegal shark trade in India. According to studies discussed at the meet, the country recorded 17 incidents involving seizures of illegal shark derivatives between 2010 and 2022.

Shark fins accounted for nearly 82 per cent of the seizures, while around 15,839.5 kilograms of shark derivatives were confiscated during the period. Tamil Nadu emerged as a major hotspot, accounting for nearly 65 per cent of the incidents.

Inaugurating the workshop, Divisional Forest Officer Manu Sathyan said one of the biggest challenges faced by enforcement agencies in marine wildlife crime investigations was accurate species identification. He stressed the importance of collaboration with research institutions such as CMFRI for scientific identification and documentation of protected marine species. CMFRI Director Dr Grinson George underlined the need for a robust enforcement network and stronger legislation aligned with ecological and societal needs. He said technology-driven surveillance and enforcement systems could significantly improve efforts to curb illegal marine wildlife trade.

Senior Director of Biodiversity Conservation at WWF-India, Dr Dipankar Ghose, said illegal trade involving marine species must be addressed differently from terrestrial wildlife trade, considering the livelihoods and socio-economic realities of fishing communities.

CMFRI's Finfish Fisheries Division Head Dr Shoba Joe Kizhakudan said marine conservation in India should not be viewed solely as a wildlife issue but also as a fisheries and livelihood concern affecting coastal communities dependent on marine resources.

"Consultation and dialogue with fishermen are essential for smooth enforcement and long-term conservation success," she said.

Dr Shoba also noted that CMFRI has been extending scientific support to enforcement agencies through rapid species identification and forensic analysis of shark fins and other marine derivatives intended for export.

The workshop is focusing on strengthening enforcement mechanisms, species identification, legal procedures, digital evidence collection and inter-agency coordination to combat wildlife crime. Sessions are being led by experts from CMFRI, WWF-India, WCCB, Wildlife Institute of India, Dakshin Foundation and the Kerala Fisheries Department. Key topics include identification of corals, molluscs, marine mammals, turtles and elasmobranchs, along with marine fisheries regulations and wildlife cybercrime investigations.