

Call to strengthen enforcement against illegal wildlife trade

The three-day meet focuses on improving enforcement mechanisms, species identification, legal procedures, digital evidence collection and inter-agency coordination to combat wildlife crime

Marine experts have proposed an integrated conservation framework, including community participation, to address the rising threat from illegal marine species trade and boost marine enforcement.

Speaking at a national capacity building workshop being held at the ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), they demanded a holistic approach combining science, enforcement, policy support and community engagement.

The three-day workshop, jointly organised by CMFRI, the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) and WWF-India, brought together 27 enforcement officials from the forest department, postal department, Railway Protection Force, police of West Coast states and the Union Territory of Lakshadweep, along with scientists, conservationists and policymakers from across the country.

Emphasising the need for coordinated action against illegal wildlife trade in the marine sector, participants observed that effective conservation requires continuous monitoring, stronger stakeholder engagement and transparent dialogue with fishing communities.

Citing relevant studies, the workshop highlighted that between 2010 and 2022, India recorded 17 incidents involving seizures of illegal shark derivatives, with shark fins accounting for nearly 82 per cent of the total seizures. About 15,839.5 kg of shark derivatives were confiscated during the period, with Tamil Nadu emerging as a major hotspot accounting for nearly 65 per cent of the incidents.

Manu Sathyan, Divisional Forest Officer, said species identification was one of the biggest challenges faced by enforcement agencies in marine wildlife crime investigations. He stressed the need for closer collaboration with research institutions like CMFRI for scientific identification and documentation of protected marine species.

CMFRI Director Grinson George stressed the need for a robust enforcement network to tackle illegal marine wildlife trade and ensure conservation. Emphasising the importance of proper legislation in line with societal needs and ecosystem requirements, he said a technology-driven approach would help step up surveillance and enforcement.

Senior Director of Biodiversity Conservation, WWF-India, Dipankar Ghose said that illegal trade in marine species must be dealt with differently from trade in terrestrial species. It needs a deeper understanding of fishers' livelihoods and motivations for illegal wildlife trade, along with finding solutions in collaboration with stakeholders to curb this trade.

CMFRI's Finfish Fisheries Division Head Shoba Joe Kizhakudan said marine conservation in India could not be treated merely as a wildlife issue but must also be viewed as a fisheries and livelihood issue affecting coastal communities dependent on marine resources. Consultation and dialogue with fishermen are essential for smooth enforcement and long-term conservation success.