

Experts call for integrated framework to curb illegal marine wildlife trade

Experts have called for an integrated conservation framework with stronger enforcement and community participation to tackle the growing threat of illegal marine wildlife trade in the country.

The call was made during a national capacity-building workshop underway at the ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute here, according to an official statement issued on Wednesday.

The three-day workshop, jointly organised by CMFRI, the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau and WWF-India, has brought together 27 enforcement officials from forest departments, police, postal department and Railway Protection Force from west coast states and Lakshadweep, besides scientists, conservationists and policymakers.

Participants stressed the need for a holistic conservation strategy combining scientific research, enforcement, policy support and community engagement to strengthen marine wildlife protection.

The workshop observed that coordinated action, continuous monitoring and transparent dialogue with fishing communities were essential for effective conservation and enforcement in the marine sector.

Experts said such engagement was necessary to address misconceptions surrounding marine conservation, particularly in the context of the recently amended Wildlife Protection Act.

Citing relevant studies, the workshop noted that India recorded 17 incidents involving seizures of illegal shark derivatives between 2010 and 2022, with shark fins accounting for nearly 82 per cent of the total seizures.

During the period, around 15,839.5 kg of shark derivatives were confiscated, with Tamil Nadu emerging as a major hotspot accounting for nearly 65 per cent of the incidents.

In his inaugural address, Divisional Forest Officer Manu Sathyan said species identification remained one of the biggest challenges faced by enforcement agencies in marine wildlife crime investigations.

He stressed the need for closer collaboration with research institutions such as CMFRI for scientific identification and documentation of protected marine species.

CMFRI Director Dr Grinson George underlined the importance of building a robust enforcement network and adopting technology-driven surveillance mechanisms to curb illegal marine wildlife trade.

He also highlighted the need for legislation aligned with societal needs and ecosystem requirements.

Senior Director of Biodiversity Conservation at WWF-India, Dipankar Ghose, said illegal trade involving marine species required a different approach from terrestrial wildlife crimes.

"It needs a deeper understanding of fishers' livelihoods, motivations behind illegal wildlife trade and stakeholder-driven solutions to curb such activities," he said.

CMFRI's Finfish Fisheries Division Head Dr Shoba Joe Kizhakudan said marine conservation in India should not be viewed merely 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.

She added that CMFRI has been extending scientific support to regulatory and enforcement agencies through rapid species identification and forensic examination of shark fins and other marine derivatives meant for export.

The workshop is focusing on improving enforcement mechanisms, species identification, legal procedures, digital evidence collection and inter-agency coordination to combat marine wildlife crimes.

Sessions are being handled by experts from CMFRI, WWF-India, WCCB, Wildlife Institute of India, Dakshin Foundation and Kerala Fisheries Department.

The discussions include identification of corals, molluscs, marine mammals, turtles and elasmobranchs, besides wildlife cybercrime investigation and marine fisheries regulations, the statement added.