

Humans threaten horseshoe crabs

STAFF WRITER, WITH CNA
Friday, Oct 31, 2008, Page 4

The population of horseshoe crabs in Kinmen has been declining since 2003, indicating that human activities are gradually beginning to threaten the survival of the species, biologists reported yesterday.

While the crabs are also found around Penghu, only adult horseshoe crabs are observed there, while baby horseshoe crabs do not thrive.

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Marine biologists who have studied the crabs for years urged the government to take swift action to protect the species, as their habitat in Taiwan has been almost entirely destroyed by over-exploitation.

The horseshoe crab is sometimes called “the living fossil” because the species has existed for some 400 million years and has not changed for 200 million years. Although it is called a crab, the arthropod is more closely related to land-based spiders and scorpions.

Although the species is not listed as endangered, its numbers in North America, Europe, Japan and Taiwan have dwindled in recent years.

Medical researchers have found substances in the blood of horseshoe crabs that have proved useful in developing new drugs.

DWINDLING NUMBERS

Chen Chang-po (陳章波), a research fellow at Academia Sinica’s Biodiversity Center, said that after the crabs disappeared from Taiwan proper because of development, he and other biologists helped organize surveys to monitor horseshoe crabs in Penghu and Kinmen.

The scientists found that young horseshoe crabs inhabit only the intertidal zones along the coastline of the Kinmen islets, while adult horseshoe crabs frequent both Penghu and Kinmen.

If over-exploitation damages the waters around Kinmen, the entire population of horseshoe crabs would be in great danger because of the loss of an important breeding ground, Chen said.

Surveys conducted between 2003 and last year indicate that the population of baby horseshoe crabs around Kinmen was decreasing, Chen said, adding that government intervention was necessary to preserve the species.

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