

THE TIMES OF INDIA

# Endangered crab falls prey to poachers for medicine testing

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KOLKATA: Bacteria causing typhoid or meningitis may at times creep into the medicines we use, especially when they are manufactured in unhygienic conditions. The only way to detect them in medicines is to run a check with a particular type of protein Carinoscorpius Amoebocyte Lysate (CAL) found in the blood cells of horseshoe crabs, found in the Sunderbans. This blue-blood king crab is on the verge of extinction.

Poachers are targeting this rare species that has its origin much older than the dinosaurs. There is enough evidence that the crab is being smuggled by poachers, who sell them at a high price to drug manufacturers.

A recent study carried out by the marine science department of Calcutta University on these priceless king crabs reveals a sharp decline in the crab population in the Sunderbans, compared to their numbers six years ago. It is because of humans that this species has now been relegated to only certain pockets in the mangrove island, and earned the "highly endangered species" tag.

Smuggling of horseshoe crabs to foreign shores is rampant, says Abhijit Mitra of the marine science department, as they are in huge demand among leading pharmaceutical companies who do not have easy access to this "wonder animal."

What is so special about this horseshoe crab? According to Mitra, the Sunderbans variety is a sub-species of the unique Carinoscorpius rotundicauda species, which is found only in Bhitarkanika in Orissa the land of the threatened Olive Ridley turtle. "The extinction of the sub-species will seriously hit drug manufacturing all over the world and would affect the biodiversity of the Sunderbans. The blood of the horseshoe crab provides a valuable medical product critical to maintaining the safety of many drugs and devices used in medical care. It is used to track endotoxins, bacterial substances that often causes high fever that can be fatal," said Mitra.

Continuous poaching by a section of unscrupulous traders of the horseshoe crab may soon deprive domestic drug companies of this bio-active substance. State drug control officials also confirmed the diminishing supply of CAL, used for testing drugs. "There is no harm extracting the blood if one keeps the king crab alive. That is the usual process. The crab is released in the pond after extracting the bio-active substance from its leg. But poachers often kill the creature," a drug control official said.

Bangladesh and Myanmar are the two common smuggling routes, said forest officials. "It is difficult to ascertain which fisherman is catching what," said an official.

Wildlife expert and former forest officer Pranabesh Sanyal said, "The dwindling has been so rapid that the horseshoe crab is now confined to Chemaguri and Jambudwip. In fact, the Jambudwip operation against human settlement was to save horseshoe crab. It is high time that NGOs were involved to stop poaching."