

Published: December 8, 2013 09:38 IST | Updated: December 8, 2013 09:38 IST

### Concern over dwindling horseshoe crab population

P. Oppili



A horseshoe crab seen at Bitarkanika estuarine waters in Orissa. Photo Courtesy: Zoological Survey of India.

The Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) has planned to request the Central government to declare horseshoe crab habitats in the country as ecologically sensitive.

The ZSI Director, K. Venkataraman, told *The Hindu* that the bizarre-looking creatures belong to the family of spiders and scorpions, and they are not really crabs. World over, four species of horseshoe crabs are found, of which two are in India.

The horseshoe crabs are found along the upper east coast, restricted between Ganges and Godavari estuary. Much of the horseshoe crab population is now in Sundarbans in West Bengal and Bhitakanika in Orissa. They are hard-shelled bottom-dwelling arthropods that live both in estuarine and continental shelf of the sea floor, he says.

The lifespan of horseshoe crabs is about 30 years. They attain sexual maturity for breeding at the age of eight or nine. Females grow longer by 30 per cent. The female digs a hole and deposits as many as 20,000 pearly green, birdshot-sized eggs.

The medical profession uses an extract from the horseshoe crab's blue, copper-based blood, known as lysate to test the purity of medicines. Certain properties of this crab's shell are also being used to speed blood clotting and to make absorbable suspensions.

Thanks to the horseshoe crab, medical science has made great advances in eye research. As this insect has got high medicinal value it is commercially exploited for pharmaceutical use, says Mr. Venkataraman.

The population of horseshoe crab is dwindling all over the world. The International Union for Conservation of Natural Flora and Fauna has included horseshoe under 'red list' and declared the species as 'Endangered.'

The Central government has included the horseshoe crab under the Schedule IV of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972.