

Living fossil habitat in Bengal under threat

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The name of West Bengal has surfaced at the world congress of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which is presently being held at Hawaii, for all the wrong reasons.

The horseshoe crab - a 'living fossil that has outlived even the dinosaurs - is now facing the threat of extinction in the coastal areas of West Bengal and Odisha. They are not found anywhere else in India.

"The threat to horseshoe crabs was discussed by scientists on the third day of the 10-day congress. Scientists led by Mark Bottom who heads the IUCN's horseshoe crab specialist group have expressed their concerns over the destruction of habitats of this animal in Asian countries including India," said P Bhadury, a marine scientist with the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research in Kolkata and the Indian counterpart of the specialist group.

They are called living fossils as they have remained unchanged for 450 million years. Of the four species of horseshoe crabs, two are found in India.

Any threat to this animal could imperil our entire health care system. The blood of horseshoe crab is harvested in huge quantities to ensure medical products such as drugs, vaccines and medical instruments are free from bacterial contamination.

They are scavengers and hence also help in keeping the ecosystem clean. Their eggs and larvae are food for a variety of birds and marine animals.

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"But overfishing, unbridled beach activities, development along the coastline and pollution are destroying their habits. Sea level rise, which is aggravating the coastal habitat loss, is also a major threat," scientists said in their presentations at the congress.

The National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSCM) under the union Environment Forest & Climate Change ministry along with Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) recently conducted a survey along the beaches of West Bengal and Odisha to find out the stretches that serve as habitats of horseshoe crabs. Other endangered marine organisms such as turtles and corals also inhabit these stretches.

Out of the four species of horseshoe crabs in the world, two are found in India. Their habitats in India are confined to the beaches of West Bengal and Odisha in areas such as Sagar Island and Bhitarkanika. In the IUCN world congress scientists have stressed that there is an urgent need to conserve the habitats of this animal across Asia.

"NCSCM would very soon propose to the union government to earmark those stretches and engage local communities to conserve them. This would be done with funding from the World Bank," said K Venkataraman former director of ZSI in Kolkata and presently the chief scientific consultant of NCSCM in Chennai.