

# 'CRIME SCRIPTS' TO UNRAVEL ILLEGAL TRADE OF MARINE SPECIES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Officials inspecting processed sea cucumber seized in Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu. File photo

An analysis of the illegal trade of marine species in India between 2015 and 2021 pointed out that sea cucumbers were the most frequently seized marine species group. Tamil Nadu recorded the highest enforcement action with 126 seizure incidents of the marine species.

The study conducted by the Counter Wildlife Trafficking team of the WCS-India (Wildlife Conservation Society-India) recorded 187 media reports citing marine wildlife seizures by various enforcement agencies in India from 2015 to 2021.

"A total of 187 incidents of illegal trade of marine species were collated between January 2015 and December 2021. Data collected for seven groups of marine wildlife species were analysed within the report, which includes sea cucumber, coral, *Syngnathidae* (seahorse and pipefish), *Elasmobranch* (shark and ray), seashell, sea fan and sea turtle," stated the recently released report titled "Illegal trade of marine species in India: 2015-2021".

The report pointed out that collectively, 64,172 kg plus 988 individual (unweighed) sea cucumbers were seized by the enforcement agencies in Tamil Nadu, Lakshadweep and the Andaman Islands. Of the 187 incidents of the illegal trade of marine species, 122 incidents involved the seizure of sea cucumber.

The document not only provided insights into the nature, the volume and the extent of the illegal marine trade across the country but also analysed the incidents involving the illegal sea cucumber trade. They were further researched using "crime scripts", to understand how the smuggling networks operated. The crime script had been prepared on the basis of the 122 incidents of seizure bringing out what went into the preparation, pre-activity, activity and post-activity phase of the smuggling of the marine group of species.

The report pointed out that due to the legalised trade of sea cucumbers in countries with close proximity to India, the sea cucumber consignments were often smuggled through those countries, to be laundered and then re-exported to the Southeast Asia markets.

Marine biologist Vardhan Patankar said that the illegal marine trade, although common, often went unreported due to the nature of the trade and as a result, the civil society, the policymakers and the local communities were left in the dark about the scale of the problem, making it hard to investigate the report and analyse.

While the most incidents of seizure (122) were of sea cucumbers, sea fan followed with 20, seahorse and pipefish 18, seashell 18 incidents, shark and rays 15, sea coral 12 and sea turtle five.

## State-wise data

Similarly in terms of State-wise seizures, Tamil Nadu (with 126 seizures) was followed by Maharashtra (13 incidents), Lakshadweep (12 incidents) and Karnataka (eight incidents). Marine

wildlife incidents were reported across 18 States, including the eight coastal States and the two island territories, the report stated. The document also cautioned that a high number of seizure incidents alone “does not always indicate a high frequency of wildlife crime, and it may be a result of effective enforcement or more media interest”.

Aaron Savio Lobo, Senior Advisor Marine program at WCS-India said that when it came to illegally traded marine wildlife, the largest volumes were harvested as an incidental catch in unselective fisheries such as trawling and gillnetting. “This includes the likes of seahorses, sharks, manta and devil rays. This is unlike the most terrestrial traded wildlife species which are directly harvested. Countering marine wildlife trade thereby requires paradigm changes in fisheries management as a whole to reduce their capture in the first place,” he added.

The report threw light on international illegal marine trade routes. “Out of the 122 sea cucumber incidents recorded between 2015 and 2021, 34 incidents either mentioned attempts to illicitly export sea cucumbers to neighbouring countries or countries with established markets for trade. Sri Lanka (26 incidents), China (six incidents) and Malaysia (two incidents) were recorded as countries that are either transit locations or destinations of trade,” it said.

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