

## Endangered Seahorse

### Caught in Trawler Nets, They are Sold as Poultry Feed, Fish Food

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They are supposed to be protected and are declared vulnerable under International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), but for Tamil Nadu fishermen, out to get the best catch in their trawlers, endangered seahorses are just bycatch which need to be dumped.

In the tonnes of bycatch that they land daily are not just small fish, but seahorses and sea cucumbers, that they sell for use as poultry feed or to the fish food and oil industry for at throwaway prices, researchers say. Seahorses, a delicacy in Southeast Asia, is also illegally exported.

Sharing details, Project Seahorse director Amanda Vincent said fishing practices like bottom trawling are wreaking havoc in the Gulf of Mannar as well as the Palk Strait. The marine species which is found near coral reefs, is on the IUCN vulnerable list.

"Fishermen drop heavy nets that scrape the ocean bed, scooping up all marine life in their path. This damages the critical habitat under the waters. These are the crucial underwater habitats of fish nurseries of commercial species," she said.

Trawling in the state has no target species. The entire biomass is netted and sold. The basic idea of fishing is to not to deplete the marine sources. "However, the country is depleting her marine resources to poultry feed and fish meal and oil industry very sadly," said Vincent.

The capture of the seahorses came to light during a study by Tanvi Vaidhyanathan, a researcher from the University of British Columbia, Canada. But with no records with the state fisheries department about the marine resources, no one knows the exact numbers at stake here.

Describing about the conditions prevailing in fish landing centres in Tuticorin, Vaidhyanathan said, "piles of marine life, which are brought by different vessels is strewn all over. "Sometimes the bycatch is sorted and sometimes it is not. They are sold to the poultry feed or fish food industry. The fishermen sell the bycatch for Rs 4/kg and at times for Rs 2/kg," she said. Fishermen used to dive into shallow waters to collect seahorses, when sea-cucumbers were not available.

Tanvi said "before 2000, the sea-horse were not protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection (WLP) Act of 1972. Data collected during that period showed that the Marine Products Export Development Authority had exported 10 tonnes of sea-horses, which means a massive 4 million

seahorses. Today, though the species has been accorded protection under WLP Act, sea-horses are still collected and illegally exported. "When a sizeable quantity comes in, they are brought to Chennai, from where they are exported. Chennai is the hub for such illegal trade," she said.

There are five species of seahorses in The Gulf of Mannar region. But their population in the wild is not known, as there was no study on the population of the endangered marine species, which makes it more difficult to track their depleting numbers. The species are :

1. *Hippocampus histrix* (Spiny)
2. *Hippocampus kelloggi* (Great)
3. *Hippocampus kuda* (Yellow)
4. *Hippocampus spinosissimus* (Hedgehog)
5. *Hippocampus trimaculatus* (Three-spot)

The solution, says Vincent, lies in regular meetings between fishermen and forest officials. The mindset of fishermen has to change too for a balance in the marine ecosystem.

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