



Illicit coral trade is on the rise in State

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Corals are mainly procured from Kochi and Chennai by traders

Hoteliers and aquarium traders are the major buyers of corals in Karnataka: Chikkerur

BANGALORE: Even as the State police are making efforts to check growing wildlife crimes, illicit coral trade is said to be continuing to thrive in Bangalore and other parts of the State.

Coral is among the list of "highly endangered" species listed in Schedule-1 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Procuring, possessing or selling coral is a crime under the Act.

Illegal trade

In gross violation of the Act, several unscrupulous elements are carrying out coral trade in Bangalore and Mysore.

The traders have been procuring corals mainly from Kochi and Chennai, Inspector-General of Police (CID Forest Cell) K.S.N. Chikkerur told *The Hindu* on Wednesday.

Corals are used for ornamental purposes in drawing rooms.

They are also cut and polished to make jewellery, boxes, vases and statues. Investigations have confirmed that hoteliers and aquarium traders are the major buyers of corals in Karnataka, he said.

Recent scientific advancements have made it possible for hobbyists to keep corals alive in their aquariums and this has caused a great increase in the demand for live coral, he said.

Raids

Since July last year, officials of the CID Forest Cell have conducted over six raids and seized different varieties of corals worth Rs. 70 lakh (notional value). In the latest raid conducted in Mysore on Tuesday, one person was arrested and corals worth Rs. 20 lakh were seized. Cases have been registered in Shivaji Nagar, Cubbon Park, J.P. Nagar, MICO Layout and Byatarayanapura police stations in Bangalore, Mr. Chikkerur said. Identification of corals is often difficult as there are several look-alike species. In some cases, the CID Forest Cell has taken the assistance of marine biologists **Ramachandra Mohan** and Ravichandra Reddy of Bangalore University.

Cases were registered only after the experts confirmed and certified that the seized articles were corals, Mr. Chikkerur said.

Great demand

Though Philippines and Indonesia top the list of coral producing nations, coral from Gulf of Mannar, the Gujarat coast and the Lakshadweep islands in India are in great demand.

Initiatives for preservation of coral reefs in India have been taken up on a large scale in the Wandur Marine National Park in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Even the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) has classified many corals as threatened species.

Corals are the skeletons of marine animals called polyps that accumulate over years to form large coral reefs, which are "rainforests" of the sea. They provide a place for marine life to lay eggs, feed and hide, and they also create a physical barrier for coasts against destructive wave action. Corals are collected underwater by diving, by dredging the ocean floor using trawling nets and also by dynamiting parts of the coral reef.

The last two methods cause heavy damage to the marine ecosystem, Mr. Chikkerur explained.

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