

CBI begins investigation as Lakshadweep sees 3rd largest sea cucumber seizure this year

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The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) began its probe into illegal sea cucumber trade in Lakshadweep on Saturday as 10 fresh consignments were traced and seized by the local forest department.

This is the eighth case and third largest seizure this year involving 220 large processed (taxidermied) sea cucumbers worth Rs 1.56 crore seized by the Lakshadweep forest department at south Agatti Islands.

With Saturday's haul, 2,500 sea cucumbers weighing 1,500 kg and worth Rs 7 crore have been seized so far this year.

Forest officials said the illegal trade skyrocketed in 2020. Damodhar AT, secretary environment, forest and chief wildlife warden, Lakshadweep administration said, "What we have caught so far this year is meagre quantities. There are huge consignments getting transported weekly by other means directly from international waters adjacent to our uninhabited islands."

He added that a CBI team had begun investigations after reaching Kochi on Saturday. "We expect at least 20-24 people to be arrested as the team makes their way to Kavaratti Island on October 13," said Damodhar.

Sea cucumbers are single branched marine organisms (invertebrates) high in demand across south-east Asia, mainly China, for food and traditional medicine. They are protected under Schedule I under the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA), 1972 so their trade is banned. The Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change imposed a total ban on harvesting and transporting sea cucumbers in 2001.

The latest case was busted following a tip-off. Forest department officials were told to be on high alert for the movement of boats near Agatti Island between October 7 and 9. "On Friday, a team led by Agatti range officer in-charge Mohammed Sinan Yafus, ten fresh consignments weighing 155.5 kg were found packed in fish presentation boxes after processing sea cucumbers in preservatives. They were ready for transportation on fish export vessels from a fish landing jetty at Agatti to China and other south-east Asian countries," said Damodhar.

The forest department suspects that sea cucumbers were poached from Vellakkara near Bitra, Perumalpar, Thinnakara and Suheli, all uninhabited islands. "Most of such illegal trade consignments from various Islands come to Agatti where boats travelling in domestic waters supply ice to local fishers and in exchange, corrupt fishermen fill up those boxes with dried and processed sea cucumbers," said Damodhar.

While a first information report (wildlife offence report) has been filed at Amini court, all suspects have escaped the island, the forest department said. "Due to inclement weather conditions, inadequate manpower and non-availability of patrolling vessels to move our central flying squad with adequate forces, the department is facing difficulties in preventing such large scale poaching, and needs immediate support," said Damodhar.

According to Hong kong-based non-profit environmental group OceansAsia, sea cucumbers are typically sold dried, canned, frozen, or as powders and extracts. With a spike in demand and prices over recent years, a kilogram of dried sea cucumber is sold for as high as Rs 65,000-68,000 per kg in international markets.

"As there is a huge economic value involved, these poachers have all the modern boats and weapons to hunt sea cucumbers in Lakshadweep waters. Lack of trained investigation team and the legal expertise in dealing with criminal cases at different courts has had a demoralising effect on efforts by our frontline staff to nab such criminals," the chief wildlife warden said.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/cbi-begins-investigation-as-lakshadweep-sees-3rd-largest-sea-cucumber-seizure-this-year/story-0xXY6nISP7D0Rf0ziCCWyM.html>