

State steps up efforts to save freshwater tiger

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MAHARASHTRA HAS intensified efforts for the conservation of endemic freshwater fish Mahseer, which is also popularly known as the 'Freshwater Tiger'.

The fish, which features among the 20 recognised mega fish species in the world, has been placed on the endangered species list in India, following a sharp decline in its number over the past four decades.

The endemic fish can only be found in clean waters. But rapid urbanisation and destruction of habitats have led to a sharp decline in Mahseer's number, say experts. "Increasing human interference, including construction activities alongside rivers and lakes, have blocked the migration routes for the fish," said an expert.

To save the endangered species, Maharashtra has now decided to enhance the scale of conservation measures undertaken in the state. Sources said the scale of breeding and conservation projects at existing sites is also being widened. "We have identified several places in the state for breeding the fish. A majority of them are in Pune district. Lonavala (Pune district) is a popular breeding site. We have also identified some sites in Satara district. The catchment area of the Sardar Sarovar dam project in north Maharashtra's Nandurbar has also been identified for breeding Mahseer," said M B Gaikwad, state commissioner of fisheries.

Conservation measures are being taken across the country to save the endangered species. Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are among other states taking steps to preserve the Mahseer.

In fact, one of the first initiatives for the Mahseer's revival was undertaken over four decades ago in Lonavala itself. The first conservation breeding programme began in 1975 and is still being run by Tata Power at their Walwan dam site in Lonavala under the 'Act for Mahseer' initiative.

Their hatchery for the conservation initiative runs on a five-acre land and has several small ponds, which breed up to 5 lakh Mahseers a year.

According to official data, the facility has



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so far distributed more than 10 lakh Mahseer fries to various agencies interested in conservation efforts. The state government alone has ordered 5 lakh fries, the highest, so far. The second highest order of 1.5 lakh fish were supplied to the Karnataka government. Haryana has also asked for 50,000 fries.

While the fish was earlier hunted for sport, it still continues to be one of the most sought-after game fish for anglers. Data reveals the Maharashtra State Angling Association has so far ordered for 40,000 Mahseer fries from the Lonavala facility. The fish has been supplied to freshwater lakes in Mumbai's Powai, and Nandurbar, said officials.

Experts said it is the size and fighting prowess of the fish that makes it so popular. A Mahseer can grow up to 9 feet in size and can weigh 40-55 kg.

In India, six species of Mahseer are found, apart from three sub-species. The Deccan Mahseer is found in fresh waters in Maharashtra and nearby areas. The Golden Mahseer is seen more prominently in the northern and northeastern parts of the country. Spotting the fish varieties is also a popular leisure activity in some parts of the country.

The Walwan centre also offers lessons in conservation to school students. Several schools have so far gained from the facility. It has different sections, the main being the hatchery where tiny eggs are kept in water and the oxygen content is increased using small fountains. Vivek Vishwasrao, head of biodiversity at Tata Power, who has been working with the hatchery for 30 years now, said besides the Golden Mahseer, they are soon going to breed the Humpback Mahseer at the facility.