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International Horseshoe Crab Day

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Why in News

Recently, the **International Union for Conservation of Nature** (IUCN)'s has decided to observe the **first-ever International Horseshoe Crab Day** on **20th June 2020**.

The celebration of the day **aims** to generate greater awareness for these ancient creatures and help in their conservation.

Key Points

- **Horseshoe Crab:**



- It is a **marine chelicerate arthropod** living in **shallow coastal waters** on **soft sandy or muddy bottom** and **spawns** (release or deposit eggs) **mostly on intertidal beaches at summer spring high tides.**
 - **Subphylum Chelicerata** is a division within the **Phylum Arthropoda** containing animals such as spiders, scorpions, harvestmen, mites and ticks. Like all arthropods, they have a **segmented body and segmented limbs** and a **thick chitinous cuticle called an exoskeleton.**
 - Other than the marine horseshoe crabs, the Chelicerata are **found primarily in terrestrial environments** worldwide.
- It is regarded as a marine **‘living fossil’.**
- There are **four extant horseshoe crab species:**
 - The American horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*) along the **eastern coast of the USA** and in the **Gulf of Mexico.**
 - The tri-spine horseshoe crab (*Tachypleus tridentatus*)
 - The coastal horseshoe crab (*Tachypleus gigas*)
 - The mangrove horseshoe crab (*Carcinoscorpius rotundicauda*)
The last three are **Indo-pacific species** found in the coastal waters of **India, southeast Asia, China and Japan.**
- **Odisha is their largest habitat in India.**
- **Importance:**
 - They have **existed since the time of the dinosaurs** and are important **ecosystem engineers and predators of small organisms.**
 - Their ecological function is to **lay millions of eggs** on beaches to **feed shorebirds, fish and other wildlife.**
 - Their large **hard shell serves as a microhabitat** for many other species such as sponges, mud crabs, mussels and snails.
 - They are a **critical link to world health, biodiversity and hold cultural importance** across the globe.

- **Threats:**
 - **Overharvesting** for use as **food, bait and biomedical testing.**
 - **Habitat Destruction:**
 - Habitat loss from coastal reclamation and development.
 - **Shoreline alterations** that are engineered to protect beaches from erosion and sea level rise due to climate change also **affect their spawning habitats.**
 - Poachers **kill them for their meat** which is popularly believed to have **aphrodisiac qualities.**
 - Trade in horseshoe crabs is rampant in many Indian states as it is believed that consumption of horseshoe crab **meat can lengthen a person's lifespan,** even though there is no scientific evidence to support this.
 - Its **carapace** (hard upper shell) **is crushed** and mixed with water to prepare a paste, which is **applied onto scars.**
- **Conservation:**
 - It is in the **Schedule IV of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972,** under which the catching and killing of a horseshoe crab is an offence.
 - **IUCN Status:**
 - **American horseshoe crab: Vulnerable.**
 - **Tri-spine horseshoe crab: Endangered.**
 - The two other species are not listed yet.
 - The crackdown on horseshoe crab poachers requires superior, **inter-state coordination among police and wildlife authorities** of Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and other states.
 - The **Zoological Survey of India** has suggested declaring the habitat of horseshoe crabs as **Eco-Sensitive Zones** for their conservation and proper management.

Source: DTE