

Save horseshoe crabs and coastal ecosystems

Chinese horseshoe crabs, *Tachypleus tridentatus*, are one of the oldest marine living fossils. Horseshoe crabs have existed for over 445 million years (1) but populations of the Chinese species have plummeted in recent decades due to increasing biomedical demands, harvesting for human consumption and habitat loss. Urgent action is needed to reverse population declines and protect coastal ecosystems.

Chinese horseshoe crabs play key roles in coastal ecosystems as benthic predators, prey, bioturbators and host for epibionts. Their eggs are a major protein source for migratory shorebirds (2). However, discovery and commercialization of the *Limulus* Amoebocyte Lysate (LAL) test for bacterial endotoxin has driven population declines (3). Over 610,000 horseshoe crabs were harvested and nearly 80,000 killed for LAL production in 2012 alone (4). Adult horseshoe crabs are a prized dish in many seafood restaurants. A survey in south China found that 132 of 155 restaurants offered horseshoe crabs (5). Climate change and associated ocean acidification, urbanization, land reclamation and water pollution are exacerbating habitat loss impacting spawning activities and juvenile nurseries (6). Breeding pairs in Guangxi Province, the species' Chinese stronghold, declined from 600,000-700,000 in the 1990s to 40,000 after 20 years (7). Declining horseshoe crab populations have implications for entire coastal ecosystems especially shorebirds (8).

In March 2019, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) listed the species as endangered. Urgent measures are needed to save horseshoe crabs. Research into animal-free LAL production is a priority (4). Protecting spawning and nursery habitat should be the focus of management actions. Relatively few Chinese people are aware of the horseshoe crab's plight. Public education is therefore needed, especially for younger generations (9). China's Belt and Road Initiative, including the New Maritime Silk Road, could further increase illegal cross-border animal trade (10). More international collaboration will be indispensable for protecting this and other endangered species.

Hong Yang^{1*}, Julian R. Thompson², Roger J. Flower²

¹ Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6AB, UK

² UCL Department of Geography, University College London, London, WC1E 6BT, UK

*Corresponding authors. Email: hongyanghy@gmail.com

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