Diver-activists picking out silent ghosts in the deep

They are removing abandoned or lost fishing nets that trap sea life

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It’s a lazy Sunday morning, but not for Suneha Jagannathan. With over 3 kg of diving gear, she is out on a mission – to collect ‘ghost nets’.

Diving to depths of 30-50 m, Ms. Jagannathan, CEO of Puducherry-based Temple Reef Foundation (TRF), helps contain a growing and insufficiently studied threat to marine ecosystems.

Ghost nets are classified under Abandoned, Lost or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear (ALDFG), which includes lines, traps, hooks, dredges and buoys.

Ghost nets can kill marine wildlife, including vulnerable species, and destroy the benthic ecosystems that exist at the lowest level of a body of water. The problem has been worsening with the global expansion in fishing operations, and the availability of more durable gear.

High quality synthetic nets can last in the oceans for centuries, and lead to micro-plastic ingestion by aquatic life. A 2010 Marine Fisheries Census by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) said there were about 1,30,000 gillnets and drift nets in operation in India.

Research needed

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in a 2009 study titled ‘Abandoned, Lost or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear’, states that almost 6,40,000 tonnes of all fishing gear (approximately 10% of the total usage) is lost or discarded in our oceans annually, in bad weather or when nets get stuck to the rocky bottom.

Sundari, a 19-year-old local fisher, has seen her livelihood vanish.

Additionally, “the economic impacts of ALDFG are complex and have not been estimated systematically but include incremental costs associated with fishing operations, compliance, accidents at sea, search and rescue and recovery,” says a 2016 submission on ‘Marine Debris, Plastics and Microplastics’ by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to the UN Secretary General.

The report also states, “Likewise, the impacts on biodiversity have not been addressed systematically.”

“We studied four different locations with the help of fishermen from Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and submitted a report to the FAO in April 2018,” said Dr. Saly N. Thomas, Principal Scientist, Department of Fishing Technology, Indian Council of Agricultural Research-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Kochi. The results of this research have not been made public yet.

“The government is also in the process of preparing a national ghost net management policy,” Dr. Thomas added.

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