

Crucifix Crab, Charybdis Feriatus, Spotted In The Straits Of Malacca

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AsianScientist (Sep. 27, 2011) - The appearance of a rare crab species in a Malaysian state half a century later has sparked a frenzy among locals in Malacca.

The crabs are unique for a conspicuous cross-shaped light mark on their shells, and were discovered by a fisherman who hauled up a dozen of these crabs on Sunday. Since then, he has been inundated by offers to buy the crabs.

“Only minimal quantities of the crabs were caught. Many locals don't buy them to eat, but to preserve the shell as it's considered sacred,” he told the Malaysian newspaper, *The Star*.

The crustacean, with the scientific name *Charybdis feriatus* or 'crucifix crab', is a species of *Malacostraca* and is mainly found in Malaysian and Indonesian waters. It was reportedly last seen in the Straits of Malacca in the 1960s.

State Rural Development and Agriculture Committee chairman Datuk R. Perumal said the state would ask the Fisheries Department to record and monitor the landings of the rare crab. They hope to conserve the crab species by breeding it.

Speculating about what led to their disappearance, a marine biologist suggested that rapid development along the state coastline may have led to the deterioration of the mangrove swamps where the crabs thrived.

Crab boosted faith on India's shores

Five years ago, a Catholic news website *UCANews* reported sightings of a similar cross-marked shell crab in Goa, India. Some Christians believe that the crabs are descendants of a crab that the missionary, Saint Francis Xavier, blessed hundreds of years ago.

Jesuit records mention that in February 1546, Francis Xavier, was caught in a storm in eastern Indonesia. In an attempt to calm the storm, he took his crucifix and dipped it into the sea, but it slipped from his grasp and fell into the water.

The next morning, as he reached the shores of Seram Island, a crab with a cross-shaped mark approached him holding his cross. Xavier knelt down, retrieved the cross, and blessed the crab.

The religious origin of the crab is a fable, said Anil Chateerjee, a scientist at the National Institute of Oceanography in India.

"The design has nothing to do with religious myths. Pigmentation of the shell depends on the environment it lives in and (on) mimicry, in which the shell changes color to aid the animal's survival," he explained.

Nonetheless, the crucifix crab continues to inspire a number of Goa's Catholic population who believe that the cross on the crab's shell is not a mere accident of nature, but also a divine message.

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