

The Hatha Jodi Superstition and the Illegal Trade of Monitor Lizards

The Bengal Monitor Lizard *Varanus bengalensis* faces a significant threat to its survival in India due to illegal wildlife trade driven by superstition. While habitat loss remains a concern, a primary driver of their decline is the demand for a talisman known as “Hatha Jodi”. This trade relies on a fraudulent practice where parts of a protected reptile are sold as rare plant roots.

The Myth Versus Biological Reality: “Hatha Jodi” (translating to “clasped hands”) basically refers to the root of the Tiger’s Claw plant *Martynia annua*. Folklore suggests that this root, which naturally resembles two hands joined in prayer, confers wealth, legal victory, and protection upon the owner. However, the genuine *Martynia annua* root is rare. To meet the high demand found in local markets and online export platforms, poachers substitute the root with the hemipenes (reproductive organs) of male Monitor Lizards. When extracted and dried, these organs shrink and curl, morphologically mimicking the shape of the plant root. Unsuspecting buyers unknowingly purchase and worship the severed organs of a reptile rather than a botanical specimen.

Methods of Extraction: The harvesting process involves severe trauma to the animal. To ensure the hemipenes retain the specific shape required for the scam, poachers typically capture the lizards alive. The animals are immobilized, often by fracturing the vertebral column or clubbing. In many documented instances, the glands are surgically extracted while the lizard is still conscious. The animals are subsequently left to die from physical trauma and blood loss. The scale of this illicit trade was highlighted in 2017, when the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) seized hundreds of these specimens during coordinated raids across Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

Legal Status: The Bengal Monitor Lizard is a protected species under Indian and international law. It is listed under Schedule I of WPA 1972, placing it in the

highest protection category alongside the Tiger and Rhinoceros. Poaching, trading, or possessing parts of this animal is a non-bailable offense punishable by up to seven years in imprisonment. Furthermore, the species is listed under Appendix I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), which bans all international commercial trade.

Ecological Impact: The extraction of Monitor Lizards has drastic effects on local ecosystems and agriculture. As apex scavengers and carnivores, these reptiles provide essential ecosystem services. They consume carrion, preventing the spread of pathogens, and regulate populations of agricultural pests, including rodents and insects. By removing these natural pest controllers, trade inadvertently damages the agricultural stability that devotees hope to protect.

Conclusion: The “Hatha Jodi” trade is a clear demonstration of how a lack of scientific understanding contributes to destruction of biodiversity. This practice not only involves consumer deception but also violates wildlife protection legislation. Effective conservation of the Bengal Monitor Lizard requires not only strict legal enforcement but also scientific awareness campaigns to help the public distinguish between a botanical root and the anatomical parts of an endangered reptile.

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