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IUCN begins red list assessment of Indian grasshoppers

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KOZHIKODE: In what could pave the way for updation of status of grasshoppers found in the country from a pest to a biodiversity indicator invertebrate species, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has started for the first time the 'red list' assessment of grasshoppers of India.

A grasshopper specialist group of the IUCN has started the assessment of endemic grasshoppers of Nilgiri biosphere reserve under a project funded by the UAE-based Mohamed bin Zayed species conservation fund with the ground support of Chennai-based Care Earth Trust.

Dhaneesh Bhaskar, principal investigator of the project and regional vice-chair of IUCN SSC grasshopper specialist group for Asia, said though there are 1,033 known Indian grasshopper species, their conservation status remains as 'not evaluated' despite them being a bio-indicator species, especially of grassland health.

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“Though the country has rich diversity in grasshopper species, no Indian grasshopper species has been listed in the 'red data list' as they have not been assessed. As many grasshopper species are flightless and endemic to narrow geographic ranges, they are sensitive to habitat disturbances and environmental change and exhibit a high extinction risk,” he added.

He said grasshoppers are generally considered as agricultural pests in India making them remain as a neglected group of insects. Most of 1,033 species in the country were described by colonial researchers. Dhaneesh expressed hope that the 'red

list' assessment of endemic grasshoppers of NBR will update their conservation status and kick off India's grasshopper conservation activities.

Prof Axel Hochkirch, chair of the IUCN SSC invertebrate conservation committee, said the assessments are of fundamental importance for nature conservation as they help to identify species with high extinction risk. Without this knowledge it will not be possible to save species from extinction.

“The IUCN red list of threatened species is the most-widely accepted system for measuring extinction risk of species, following a standardized quantitative methodology. For red list assessments we collect all information on the distribution, population, habitat preferences, threats and conservation activities. For many species this information might not be readily available,” he said.

He added that during the IUCN world conservation leaders meeting in October 2019, the SSC had decided to start a project to help developing and implementing a conservation strategy for the threatened species in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve following the Assess-Plan-Act principles, i.e. assessing the conservation status of species and identifying major threats, planning the necessary conservation action based upon the Red List assessments and implementing the conservation action.