

A significant population of Leatherback turtles in the Indian ocean

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The global decline of leatherbacks has received much attention in recent times, including predictions of extinction in the near future (Spotila *et al.* 2000). Spotila *et al.* (1996) dismiss the population of leatherbacks in the Indian ocean as minor and also state that they may be under the gravest threat along with Pacific populations. We evaluated the status of marine turtles in the Andaman and Nicobar islands in the context of the Indian ocean, using data from recent surveys (Andrews *et al.*, 2001).

These surveys indicate that past estimates of nesting from the Indian ocean, particularly the Andaman and Nicobar islands, may have underestimated populations. In fact, surveys conducted 10 years apart at Galathea, Great Nicobar do not indicate a decline in the population (Tiwari, 1991; Bhaskar, 1993, Andrews *et al.*, 2001).

During 2000-01, a total of 1690 nests were counted on Great Nicobar island (Andrews *et al.* 2001) Dividing by 5 (average annual clutch frequency) and multiplying by 2.5 (average remigration interval) yields a population estimate of 845 adult females for Great Nicobar island. Similarly, we estimate a minimum of 82 adult females for Little Nicobar island (Bhaskar, 1993 counted 165 nests on the southwestern coast). These are very conservative estimates, since Bhaskar (1993) did not cover all leatherback nesting beaches in Little Nicobar and Andrews *et al.* (2001) only surveyed the west coast of Great Nicobar towards the end of the season. Andrews *et al.* (2001) estimate another 150 individuals for the Andaman islands and other islands in the Nicobar group.

It would therefore appear that the population of adult female leatherbacks using the Andaman & Nicobars islands exceeds a 1000 individuals. Spotila *et al.* (1996) list just three other colonies in the world with more than 1000 individuals. Hence this island group, Great Nicobar Island in particular, should be considered one of the major colonies for leatherbacks in the world. These rookeries along with those in Sri Lanka, also increase the

significance of the Indian ocean region for leatherback turtles.

Apart from egg predation by feral dogs and pigs (and occasional predation on adults by saltwater crocodiles), these populations currently seem to be in little danger of precipitous declines. We therefore find no evidence to support the claims of Spotila *et al.* (1996) with regard to leatherback turtles in the Indian ocean. The large Nicobar populations and moderate Andaman and Sri Lankan populations should certainly be carefully monitored, since an increase in developmental activities and commercial fishing could well cause sudden declines in these populations.

References

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