

Green Turtle in soup: skins in hundreds seized

The giant green turtles, Chelonia mydas, still found in the 200 miles long Arabian Sea coast from Karachi to Mekran, are being destroyed for money despite an international appeal to protect the endangered species. Informed by Game Watcher Ghulam Husain Jaball, the District Game Warden organised a raid on a godown on the West Wharf where several hundred costly skins of this rare reptile were found packed in gunny bags ready for export as frog skins.

Since there is a ban on the killing or netting of green turtle(s), the businessman was arrested....and ordered to pay the maximum penalty-Rs 5,000....for violating the Sind Wild Life Protection Ordinance 1972. The sea coast, especially along the Hawkesbay, Sandspit, Clifton and Buleji beaches, has been one of the natural nurseries of the species. They visit these beaches on moon-lit nights in the months of September and October for laying eggs.

There is great demand for green turtles in Europe, America and the Far East markets. Everything of the giant turtle is considered precious. Its shell-over 4 feet in length- is used for making expensive ornaments, considered status symbol(s) by fashionable ladies in Europe and America. Its fat is used in the preparation of cosmetics and high quality polish for expensive cars. Moreover, green turtle soup is a delicacy reserved for the wealthy in exclusive hotels of Europe, America and the Far East (Japan, in particular).

Adult green turtles, their weight ranging from 600 lbs to 1000 lbs, are often four to six feet long, from the snout to the tip of the tail. The powerful forelimbs have a stretch of 10 feet. There is no marked difference in the size of the two sexes, but the males can easily be recognized from their long, thick tails. Their name "green" is derived from the colour of their fat. Their shell is olive-green, brownish, and in cases even bluish-black.

The species has a placid disposition, more than other sea turtles, and does not attack anyone. Green turtles, are therefore easily caught or killed when they land on the beaches, looking like prehistoric monsters. A group of tourists, while visiting Karachi's beaches in 1972, came across scores of dead green turtles in Hawkesbay, with many more shells scattered about in the Sandspit area. These tourists, conscious of the danger to the species, wrote a letter to the World Wildlife Fund authorities appealing for protection to the reptile....They noted that the turtle population had been reduced to the point where it was threatened with extinction.

The World Wildlife Fund authorities approached the Government of Pakistan seeking protection for this rare species. The Sind Wild Life Management Board took prompt action and immediately posted Game Watchers along the beaches in November 1972. It was also declared a "protected animal" under the Sind Wild Life Protection Ordinance. But greedy exporters seem not to have remained idle even after the ban. Green turtles have already disappeared from parts of the world. In order to protect them the Marine Turtle Specialist Group of the IUCN expressed concern over its disappearance from several countries as was reported in the World Wildlife Fund Yearbook 1969; and hence the worldwide appeal for its protection.

Some countries, including Malaysia, Madagascar, and Australia, have enacted laws for their protection (Haudan Anjad Ali, Karachi, 12.12.76)