

Jan 1978

TURTLE MEAT POISONING

Severe poisoning and sometimes death from consuming hawksbill (Eretmochelys imbricata) meat was reported as early as 1859 by Sir James Emerson Tennent in his book "Ceylon- An Account of the Island". He wrote, "The edible turtle is found on all the coasts of the island, and sells for a few shillings or a few pence according to its size and abundance at the moment. At certain seasons the turtles on the south-western coast of Ceylon are avoided as poisonous, and some lamentable instances are recorded of death which was ascribed to their use. At Pantura, to the south of Colombo, twenty-eight persons who had partaken of turtle in October 1840 were seized with sickness immediately after which coma succeeded, and eighteen died during the night. Those who survived said there was nothing unusual in the appearance of the flesh except that it was fatter than ordinary."

P E F Deraniyagala (1939) reports a belief that the hawksbill is rendered poisonous after it has fed on certain algae. "Experienced fishermen seldom eat an Eretmochelys without first chopping up its raw liver and throwing it to the crows. If the latter discard the liver, the animal is poisonous...The symptoms, according to the Medical Officer of Health, were inflammation of the mouth, vomiting, pains in the limbs, burning sensation in the stomach and scratches (probably wals) on the body."

On the south Indian Coromandel Coast, deaths from this phenomenon occur every two or three years. Turtle meat is regularly sold in coastal town markets such as Tuticorin. Live turtles are brought in from nearby villages and slaughtered in the market place; flesh blood is drunk as an elixir, and the meat sold at Rs 4-5 per kg. During a visit to Tuticorin market, species on sale were greens (Chelonia mydas), Ridleys (Lepidochelys olivacea) and hawksbills. Before hawksbill meat was sold a crude test was carried out to ensure the edibility of the meat.

In August '77 nine persons including six children (8 months to 7 years) died at Manapad, Tamil Nadu after eating hawksbill meat. Over 80 people consumed the poisonous meat on 3rd August; most of them were slightly sick and successfully treated at local hospitals.

Mr B Moraes of Manapad kindly arranged for details of the tragedy to be sent to the Snake Park. According to Dr Ramasubramanian of Udangudi, poison meat does not seem to be seasonal. He says fishermen can tell if the meat is poisonous and in this case advised that the turtle be thrown away. Symptoms, occurring two days after consumption of the meat, included vomiting, diarrhoea, giddiness and headache. Neck rigidity and unconsciousness or semi-consciousness followed, depending on severity of the attack. Death occurred another two or three days after onset of symptoms.

Dr Balaji, of the German Clinic at Manapad, found 'Siquil', an antiemetic, 'Anthisan' (food allergy) and terramycin satisfactory remedies. He states that if treatment is begun before the collapse stage, cases respond satisfactorily. He believes the cause to be pathogenic bacteria.