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Status of sea turtles along the Pondicherry coast, India

Pondicherry is a small town in the eastern coast of India. It has a coastline of about 15 km, although only 11 km comprise sandy beaches suitable for nesting sea turtles. In other areas, boulders have been placed along the beaches to avoid erosion. Many works regarding sea turtle nestings have been done in the neighbouring areas, such as Madras (Valliappan and Whitaker, 1974; Silas and Rajagopalan, 1984; Abraham, 1989), but no record exists on sea turtle nesting on the Pondicherry coast. A survey was undertaken during the months of December-April in 1998. Along the Pondicherry coast, there are nine coastal villages: Kanagasettikulam, Chinnakalpet, Periakalpet, Periyaveerampatinam, Chinnaveerampatinam, Nallavaadu, Pannithittu, Narambai and Moorthikuppam. A questionnaire was prepared and the fishermen living in the coastal villages where interviewed, during the months of December and January for collecting secondary information on sea turtle nesting.

The villagers reported seeing over 100 nests annually 10 years before, but in recent years, the number of nestings has reduced considerably. According to the villagers, sea turtle nests were not seen in the beaches other than Nallavaadu and Pannithittu for the past three years. Based on this information, the beaches of Nallavaadu and Pannithittu were patrolled every night from January to April. Other villages were visited once a week and villagers were asked to collect information on nests. During the entire season, only five nests were recorded, all belonging to the olive ridleys (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). Nesting occurred only in the beaches of Nallavaadu and Pannithittu. The beach stretch of the Nallavaadu and Pannithittu is about 3.5 km long, of which

only 0.5 km is inhabited by fishermen. The other villages are located in close proximity to each other, and almost the entire area of beach utilized by fishermen, including huts, kattamarans (fishing vessels), fish markets, etc. This appears to be the primary reason for the preference of turtles to nest on the beaches of Nallavaadu and Pannithittu where there is minimal disturbance.

During the survey, the number of dead turtles washed ashore was 54. The trawlers operating in these areas are suspected to be responsible for the mortality. Fishermen working in the trawlers also confirmed this. The secondary information collected from the villagers revealed that almost all nests are collected for sale in the fish markets of Pondicherry. This year, of five nests collected, three were relocated and two were incubated in pots.

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