

(63)

Hornbill - April-June '78

SEA TURTLES AND OTHER MARINE LIFE IN LAKSHADWEEP

Sea turtles of three species occur commonly in the waters around India's Lakshadweep islands, situated 120-200 miles off Kerala's coast.

A beach walker on Minicoy, the southernmost of the group, will see Green and Hawksbill turtles as they come close inshore to feed, about the time of high tide. The same may be said of many of the remaining 9 inhabited and 16 un-inhabited islands forming the Union Territory.

There is a difference, however. On the latter islands, turtles are sighted only during the period of the southwest monsoon and, to a lesser extent, in the month following (October). On Minicoy, turtles are seen throughout the year.

Sea turtles are actively hunted on all islands barring Minicoy, where turtling is sporadic. This appears to be the most likely explanation for the seasonal difference in sightings.

The law banning turtle catching seems to be difficult to enforce. The Green and the Hawksbill are the species that are heavily exploited. Whether this is the reason for the apparent preponderance of the third species, the Olive Ridley, in the five islands of the Amindivi group, is not clear. Unlike in many places, only the fat of the Green turtle is utilized, its meat being wasted. Turtle fat from Greens, Ridelys and the occasional Leatherback turtle is used to water proof the joints of country boats, in which copra produced in the islands is often transported to the mainland. The Laminæ on the shell of the Hawksbill fetch about Rs.150/- per kg on the mainland.

While many turtles are caught on land as they come ashore to nest, the more usual method employed is harpooning by hand at sea - both from country craft as well as from mechanized fishing boats.

Off the seasonally uninhabited island of Suheli Valiyakara where turtles nest in large numbers during the monsoon, many Green turtles are harpooned as they mate at the water surface.

Sharks often prey on young and adult turtles, but man poses a far greater threat to the turtles future. On Suheli Valiyakara, the most important turtle-nesting island in Lakshadweep, parts of the half mile long nesting beach have been fenced off by coconut cultivators in order to prevent nesting Green turtles from coming ashore to lay, the reason being that a few coconut saplings may inadvertently be uprooted by nesting turtles.

Green turtles, by and large, have forsaken Suheli Cheriyakara island as a nesting site after the construction of the lighthouse there three years ago. Now, another light source is planned for neighbouring Suheli Valiyakara island.

The rat eradication programme on many islands where rodent damage to coconuts is heavy, includes the "destruction to dwelling and breeding places of rats such as wild thick growths of perennial bushes and shrubs". Most of the vegetation referred to (*Scaevola*, *Tournefortia*, *Pennisetum*, etc.) grows on the seashore of the islands, the interiors of which have been given over most exclusively to the cultivation of coconuts. Their destruction will result in the total disappearance of the islands endemic vegetation, in addition to removing the nesting habitat preferred by Green turtles and exposing the shores to the sea's erosion effects.

On the brighter side, other marine fauna in Lakshadweep does not appear to suffer from over-exploitation.

Dead coral is sometimes extracted, for construction purposes, from the reefs and lagoons inspite of a law prohibiting this.

Cowries.. mainly *Cypraea caputserpentis* and *Cypraea moneta*-- are collected commercially from the reefs bordering many islands. Of approximately 180 species of cowrie know world-wide, about forty odd may be found in Lakshadweep waters. Of these, I collected 21 of the more common varieties (almost all were known to Linnaeus in 1758).

Those identified are listed below:

<i>C. tigris</i>	<i>C. isabella</i>
<i>C. histrio</i>	<i>C. vitellus</i>
<i>C. arabica</i>	<i>C. nucleus</i>
<i>C. caputserpentis</i>	<i>C. poraria</i>
<i>C. moneta</i>	<i>C. argus</i>
<i>C. erosa</i>	<i>C. talpa</i>
<i>C. lynx</i>	<i>C. helvola</i>
<i>C. carneola</i>	<i>C. cribraria</i>
<i>C. scurra</i>	<i>C. depressa</i>

The last five species are included from dead shells cast up on shore. Also, *C. Mauritiana* is reliably reported to occur in Minicoy.

On Kalpeni island, where the October 1977 cyclone has washed ashore multitudes of ocean-going purple snails (*Janthina* sp.) molluscs were abundant.

Here I acquired a glossy Olive shell of an unidentified species. It was 83mm long; the largest species of Olive in existence grows to 100 mm.

The lagoon at Kavaratti typifies a snorkeller's paradise; whether one can always pick a location suitable to explore the depth ranges from 0 to 12'. In the calm, clear water may be observed the Crown-of-thorns starfish, *Acanthaster planci*; large moray eels and lobsters sheltering in crevices; sand eating sea cucumbers of at least 4 species; innumerable colourful coral fishes; the occasional shark, small and harmless; sting rays camouflaged in the sand of the lagoon bed; octopuses peering warily from their sand of the lagoon bed; *Tridacna* clams and spider conches, among other creatures.

Hopefully, this coral wonderland will remain as free from commercial exploitation as it is today, and will continue to make the trip to the islands intensely rewarding for the layman, or the marine biologist or the fisheries scientist.

S. BHASKAR
Field Officer.