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NOTES FROM LAKSHADWEEP (LACCADIVE ISLANDS)

S Bhaskar, Madras Snake Park, conducted a 4½ month survey of sea turtles in the Lakshadweep islands, during Sept '77- Jan. '78

From a nature lover's standpoint, India's Lakshadweep islands, which lie 120 to 200 miles off Kerala's coast constitute a happy hunting ground, as do coral islands all over the world. The marine biologist, fisheries scientist, scuba diver and amateur snorkeller will find enough sea life to keep himself happily occupied indefinitely. In addition, thousands of sea birds of three species nest each year on the uninhabited sandy island of Pitti.

The ten inhabited islands in Lakshadweep are accessible by ship from Cochin, and occasionally from Calicut. Motor launches also ferry passengers between the islands, except to Minicoy, which lies far south- 200 miles from Chetlat, the northernmost inhabited island.

While an official permit is necessary to visit the islands, cottages meant for domestic tourists are being constructed on Kadmat Island. Batches of scuba diving Italian tourists have been regularly visiting uninhabited Bangaram Island since 1975, during Nov-April.

The inhabited islands vary from 250 mts in length to about 5 miles. Many are roughly crescent shaped with a lagoon, protected from the open sea by a circular coral reef, nestling in the hollow of the crescent.

The islanders are all Muslims, their primary occupations being fishing and coconut cultivation. The language spoken is like Malayalam. Minicoyans speak "Mahl" reportedly allied to the language spoken in the Maldives. Lakshadweep includes 16 uninhabited islands and islets. On four of these- Suheli Valiyakara, Suheli Cheriyakara, Bangaram and Timakara- substantial numbers of sea turtles nest. Inhabited Androth and Kadmat islands also support nesting populations.

The Olive Ridley (Lepidochelys olivacea), the green (Chelonia mydas) and the hawksbill (Eretmochelys imbricata) are the three species present. Fishermen also occasionally encounter the giant leather-back turtle, which grows to 8 ft. All species are actively sought after, except on Minicoy, where many of the able bodied are sea farers. Sea turtles are harpooned, netted or simply grabbed by hand and killed for their fat, which is used as a sealant and preservative for the islander's country craft. These sailing craft transport the islander's produce- copra and dried fish- to the mainland. Some are also used for fishing, though mechanized launches ~~xxxxxx~~ available at government-subsidized rates are more popular.

The shell of the hawksbill is valuable. It is sold to dealers in Calicut, to be converted into ornamental articles- the illegality of capturing turtles and dealing in turtle articles notwithstanding. Turtle eggs are sometimes excavated and turtle meat is occasionally eaten.

All the islands are low-lying, and are devoid of hills. While coconut plantations blanket most of the islands, the land flora is sparse. For example Kavaratti has only 22 species- many of them grasses. Kalpeni island, which was ravaged by a cyclone during the survey period, harbours 14 bird species, some of which are seasonal visitors.

scattered still is the island's terrestrial fauna. There do not appear to be any endemic species.

Rattus rattus gnaws through coconut husks to get at the kernels and takes a heavy toll of coconuts. A rat eradication programme is under way. Also prevalent are the house mouse (Mus musculus) and a shrew. A mongoose was seen on Androth island. Dogs and cats are not common; on Minicoy some domestic cats have turned wild. Cows, goats and sheep have been introduced from the mainland. Reptiles include the garden lizard (Calotes versicolor), the skink Mabuya carinata and a gecko, Hemidactylus sp). A species of terrestrial snake is said to live on Androth, Agatti, Amini and Kalpeni (possibly Lycodon aulicus).

The marine life more than compensates for the limited flora and fauna found onshore. While snorkelling in three feet of water on a spring low tide in the lagoon bordering Amini Island, I was squirted twice by a small 2 ft long octopus. Its dark brown 'ink' was indeed effective in hiding the creature from view. All around me were men, women and children prodding and skewering octopods in their dens-- to be later boiled and eaten. The longest specimen measured about 5

Large and beautiful tiger cowries (Cyproea tigris) more than 3" long, crawled about coral patches in water 5-10 ft deep, their polished shells reflecting the sun's rays in the clear water. Vertical underwater visibility often extends to 50 ft-- horizontal visibility may be double this distance. A small, streamlined shark traced a tight circle around me and swam off as I snorkelled near the reef a quarter mile from Kavaratti's lagoon shore. Its speed, grace and almost imperceptible swimming motions are impressive. Off Suheli Cheriya-kara, the crew of a fishing launch I was travelling in harpooned a manta ray with a 13 ft wingspan. Two turtles copulating at the surface narrowly escaped the same fate.

While swimming in Kavaratti's lagoon, a tiny iridescent blue fish, a "cleaner wrasse" delicately nipped me repeatedly on the legs, searching for microscopic tid-bits-- its more usual occupation being picking off bacteria and dead matter off other fishes' scales and mouth.

Scorpion fishes (Pterois sp.) hovered about boldly, loth to louse off at my approach, as though aware of the poison-laden spines concealed among their frilly fins.

Almost every invertebrate phylum is represented. Large molluscs include the giant clam (Tridacna sp), 3" cones (Conus betulinus), scorpion shells (Lambis sp), vase and helmet shells (Vassum and Cass. sp), Triton shells (Charonia sp), besides octopi. The coral eating Crown-of-Thorns starfish (Acanthaster planci) is found on many islands. Brittle stars and holothurians are frequently encountered under rocks, as also are cowries, sponges, crabs, lobsters and moray eels, to name a few. Cowries, mainly Cyproea caput-serpentis are collected in large numbers from the reefs at low tide and are sold on the mainland for Rs 14 per hundred.

The rapidly increasing population in the islands will soon result in the permanent colonization of Suheli Valiyakara and Suheli Cheriya-kara islands, which at present are visited by fishermen and plantation owners only during the fair season. When this comes to pass, sea turtles will inevitably cease nesting on these islands, as they

mostly have on the other inhabited islands. Of more immediate concern is the fencing off of Valiyakara's important nesting beach by plantation owners. Unless these islands are designated as sanctuaries, as Pitti island has been for birds, sea turtles may well cease to nest here.

"THE DISGUSTING RACE OF SERPENTS....."

(From the Preface to "An Account of Indian Serpents Collected on the Coast of Coromandel" by Patrick Russell, London 1796.)

Few Branches of the Natural History of the East Indies, have been less cultivated in the Company's establishments abroad, than that of Serpents. It must be acknowledged, that it offers no attractive allurements; and that those who, from other avocations, can only spare transient attention to subjects of Natural History, are more likely to prefer objects less disgusting, and experiments accompanied with less cruelty, and personal danger. Even the eager and resolute Naturalist has to contend with many difficulties in this path of research. He cannot, at once, divest himself of the abhorrence, next to innate, of these reptiles; nor can he soon acquire a dexterity in handling them, with that calmness requisite for his own safety. The search for plants, for birds, for even insects, is comparatively pastime, or pleasurable occupation; but in the actual pursuit of the disgusting race of serpents, he stands in need of assistants who are not, at all times, to be procured; and if he relies solely on the diligence of such as he may employ, he will find himself exposed to the chagrin of incessant disappointment. Nor is this all; to a stranger not acquainted with the language of Hindostan, the difficulty of obtaining local information, is often increased by the stupidity of menial interpreters; the curiosity, at the same time, of the Gentoos, extends little beyond the limits of their ordinary concerns they are naturally credulous; and have a strong propensity to the marvellous.

That less audent, or more casual curiosity, should have been dampened amid so many discouragements, will not appear surprising; nor that their influence should have extended even to the province of the medical gentlemen abroad, to which researches into physiology more peculiarly belong. The effect of such influence, however, will hardly be doubted, when, after the opportunities of observation in a course of two Centuries, the medical history of symptoms consequent to the bite of serpents, remains in a state not less defective, than the natural history of the reptiles themselves.

Yet, it is not to be supposed that a subject of such interesting importance in that country, has been altogether neglected. There are many of the gentlemen long resident abroad, who recollect (however imperfectly), circumstances attending accidents, which happened with their own knowledge; and I heard, when in India, of several who had formerly dedicated some leisure hours to experiments on serpents. But it is to be lamented that the scattered information has never been collected; and that the result of experiments, together with accidental discoveries, have not been recorded in a manner to preserve them for the benefit of posterity.

When allowance is made for those who return to their native count and for those who find their graves in India, the European inhabitan