

RPN  
BHAJ 3912

A SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION PROJECT IN INDIA

(Preliminary Phase)

(63)

Sea Turtle Surveys of Great Nicobar and Little Andaman Islands

WWF Project No.

IND/1980/2

Name and address of the  
Project executant:

Satish Bhaskar  
C/o. Mrs. Brenda Bhaskar  
Madras Snake Park Trust  
Raj Bhavan P.O.,  
Madras-600 022.

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received upto 15 March, 1981.

Rs. 6,570/- (This excludes expenses incurred during two round trips, Madras-Bombay, to hold talks with W.W.F., India.)

Objectives of the Survey:

1. Locating the nesting beaches of sea turtles on Great Nicobar and Little Andaman islands.
2. Collecting data pertinent to sea turtle conservation-nesting species, density and seasons, commerce in sea turtle products and eggs, human and animal predation.

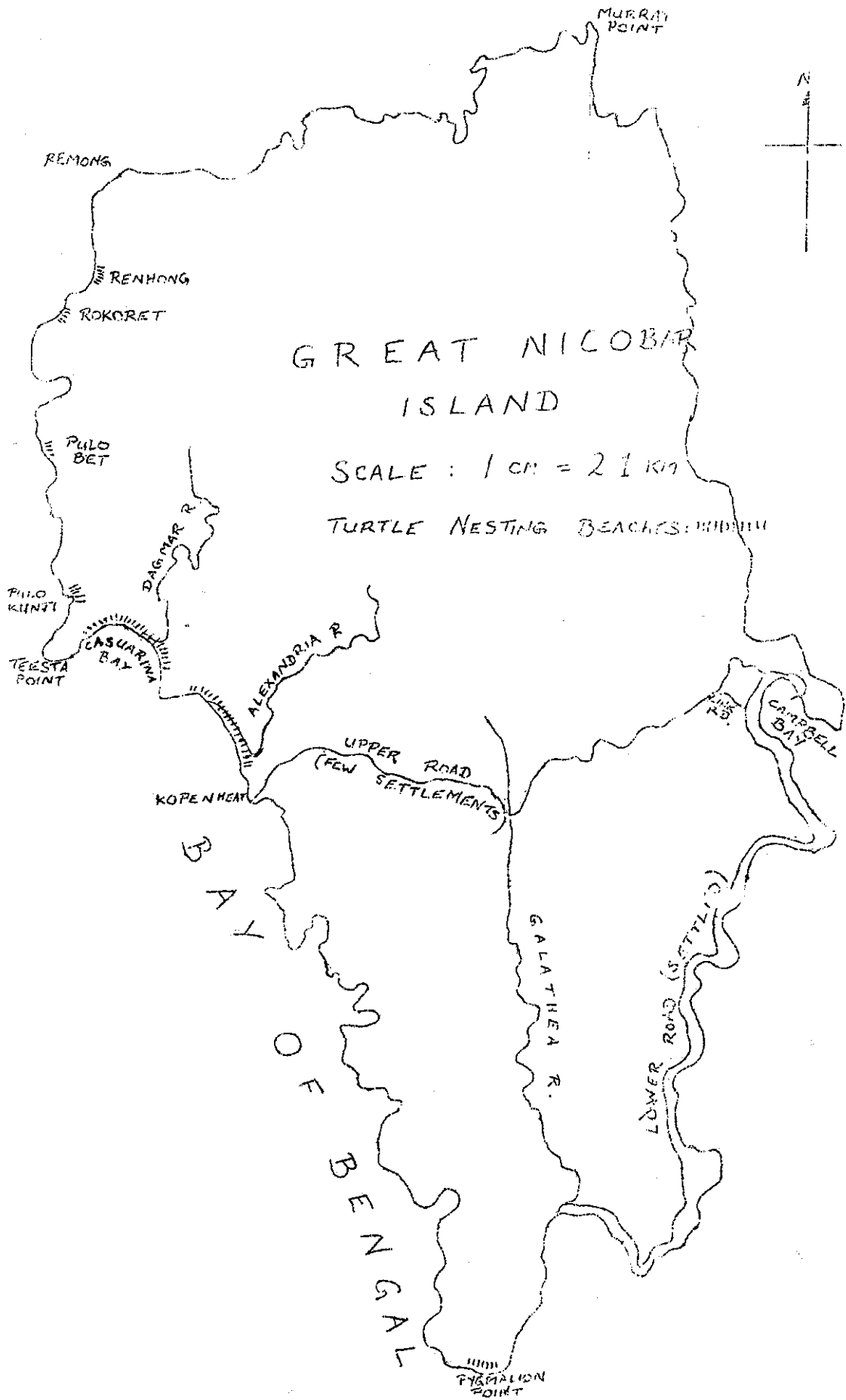
Period of Survey:-

17 January - 14 March 1981. Of these 57 days, the actual Survey work covered 15 days - 9 on Great Nicobar and 6 on Little Andaman.

Background:

The Andaman and Nicobar area includes important nesting and feeding habitats for sea turtles in India. Of five sea turtle species known from Indian waters, four are known to occur, and to nest, on these islands - the Leatherback, Dermochelys coriacea; the Green turtle, Chelonia mydas; the Hawksbill, Eretmochelys imbricata; and the Olive Ridley, Lepidochelys olivacea. Perhaps the last nesting colony of Leatherbacks on the Indian mainland was wiped out by human predation near Quilon, Kerala, early this century. Over the last 50 years, only stray instances of nesting by Leatherback on the mainland coast and in Lakshadweep have been reported. The recent discovery of colonies of Leatherback nests on beaches at Little Andaman, Great Nicobar, Katchal, Rutland and on other islands in the Andamans and Nicobars lends fresh hope in the conservation of this species in India, and it was primarily in order to locate further nesting beaches used by

1981. WWF-Report



Leatherbacks that the present surveys of Little Andaman and Great Nicobar were undertaken. In 1979, about 80 excavations made by nesting Leatherbacks had been found at uninhabited West Bay, Little Andaman, and 10 at South Bay, in early January. Leatherbacks usually nest on beaches near the mouths of rivers, and a total of about 160 nests were found in 1979 near the mouths of the Dagmar and Alexandria rivers in Great Nicobar. Nesting also took place, in smaller numbers, near the mouth of the Galathea river and on two beaches to the south of the Nicobari village of Pulo Babi. More than 30 nests made by Olive Ridges (a few of these may have been Hawksbill nests, with which they could be confused) were also present on the beaches near the Alexandria and Dagmar rivers. Four fresh nest-excavations found in early April 1979 at Pygmalion Point had probably been made by Hawksbill.

Routes taken:

Madras-ship-Port Blair-ship-Campbell Bay, Great Nicobar-army truck, foot and Nicobarese sailboat-Kondul island-sailboat, foot-Campbell Bay-ship-Port Blair-ship-Hut Bay, Little Andaman foot-south of Jackson Greek via South and West Bays-foot-Hut Bay-bus, foot and rowboat-Dugong Creek Onge settlement-rowboat, foot, bus-Hut Bay-ship-Port Blair-ship-Madras.

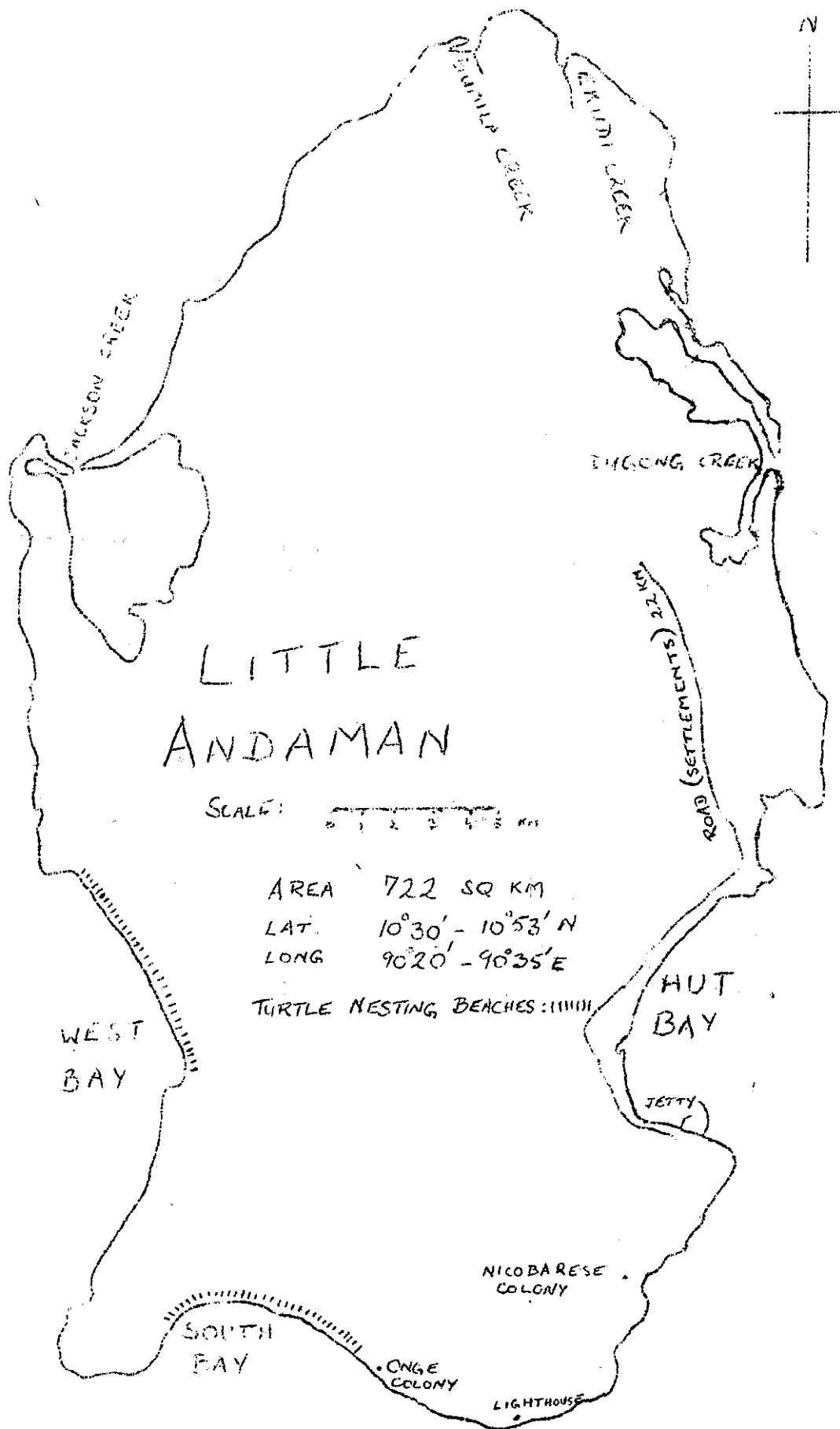
Survey findings:

a) Great Nicobar:

The productive turtle-nesting beaches at the mouths of the Dagmar and Alexandria were revisited during the period 6-14 February 1981. Sixty-three excavations made by nesting Leatherbacks were present, 55 near the Alexandria and 8 near the Dagmar. Olive Ridley nests numbered 137 (this figure may also include a few Hawksbill nests), 33 near the Alexandria and 104 near the Dagmar. Of the 63 Leatherback nests, three had been excavated by water monitor lizards (Varanus Salvator) and the eggs eaten, and 10 marked with upright stakes by Nicobarese, indicating that the eggs from these nests had been removed (either by animal predators or by the Nicobarese themselves). Marking nests thus saves future Nicobari egg-hunters from the trouble of digging up raided nests. Olive

Ridley eggs, which are laid in egg-chambers much shallower than those of the Leatherback (the topmost eggs may be 8 cm below the level of the beach-sand compared to 60 cm for the Leatherback) are more easily located by the Nicobarese, who use probe-sticks for the purpose. Of the 137 Olive Ridley nests near the two rivers, 98 had been marked by upright stakes and 2 visibly raided by monitor lizards. Leatherback tracks were evident in 30 instances and Ridley tracks in 23; the fall in numbers as compared to those encountered by the surveyor in 1979 being partly attributable to the fact that the earlier survey had been conducted in April, after the end of the main nesting season for the two species. Sea turtle eggs belonging to all species are actively sought for and eaten by the Nicobarese and perhaps also by the occasional Shom-pen tribal who may pole a raft down-river from his village in the island's interior upto the mouth of the Dagmar, for this purpose. The Nicobarese live in villages that consist of one to three huts each, there being five villages on the west coast of Great Nicobar to the north of the turtle beaches (along a 50 km stretch of coast) and about five to the south. There exist at each of the five northern villages potentially good nesting beaches also, especially at Renhong village where four Leatherback and two Olive Ridley nests were present; but the Nicobarese, their domestic dogs and, perhaps, pigs, leave few clutches to hatch-all but two Leatherback nests at Renhong had been marked with upright stakes. All species except the Leatherback are eaten by the Nicobarese, who will spear turtles at sea or turn them while nesting.

The sea between Great Nicobar and Kondul island (Pryce channel and environs) appears to be a favoured inter-nesting area for Olive Ridleys; four were seen at sea from a Nicobari sailboat in the span of 1½ hours. One of these four, which was harpooned for food by a Nicobarese, carried 130 shelled eggs that would have been laid in a few days. A Hawksbill was also observed in the sea near Kondul island. Two rumored beaches, one each on the north and northeast coast of Great Nicobar, which may also be favoured by nesting turtles, were left unvisited for want of time.



# LITTLE ANDAMAN

SCALE: 0 1 2 3 4 5 KM

AREA 722 SQ KM  
LAT. 10°30' - 10°53' N  
LONG 90°20' - 90°35' E

TURTLE NESTING BEACHES: |||||

WEST BAY

SOUTH BAY

HUT BAY

NICOBARESE COLONY

ONGE COLONY

LIGHTHOUSE

JETTY

b) Little Andaman Island:

Some of the most promising nesting areas - on the island's northern half-were left unsurveyed because of delays in obtaining a valid "tribal area" permit, meant to protect the roughly 110 surviving Onge tribals from undesirable external contact. The nesting beaches at West Bay and South Bay were revisited between 23-26 February 1981. Of the 80 Leatherback excavations found on West Bay and 10 at South Bay--these numbers were identical to the numbers found in 1979--none were less than three days old, perhaps because of the prevalence of neap tides at the time, the turtles presumably being deterred from coming ashore by the possibility of being injured by waves or surf against submarine rocks and reefs.

Little Andaman has been settled only along half of its eastern coast, making the island an ideal place where the sea turtle nesting beaches on its western coast could be accorded sanctuary status, for few Onges and fewer mainlanders/settlers ever go there. Moreover, the existence of Onge colonies flanking the other settlements serves as a deterrent to those wishing to penetrate to the island's western, northern, and southern sides, the Onge colonies being out of bounds to those not holding a valid permit issued by the Administration. Sea turtle nests at South Bay and West Bay are preyed upon mainly by water monitor lizards (Varanus salvator) and perhaps by ghost crabs and wild pigs, which are all very common there. The saltwater crocodile (Crocodylus porosus), another endangered species, also occurs commonly in the creeks at South and West Bays, just as they do on the west coast of Great Nicobar, and will thus benefit if the boundary of the projected sea turtle sanctuary at West Bay is extended to include the creeks that drain the coast there.

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Only one Green turtle nest was observed during the entire survey, at South Bay. However, it was reported by Nicobarese that substantial nesting by Green turtles occurs on Meroe island, which is uninhabited for about 10 months in a year.

The accidental capture of an immature Leatherback-of an intermediate size rarely encountered anywhere - in a shore seine net at Hut Bay on Match Ist is worth recording. This turtle was butchered and consumed by settlers.

Plans for further work in the area:

The coasts on the northern half of Little Andaman and the two (rumoured) beaches on Great Nicobar's north and north-west coast should be surveyed during the Leatherback's main nesting season, Dec.-Feb., and Meroe island for Green turtles during the monsoons, June-August.

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