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Lissemys in Andamans

Dr. A K Das, Officer-in-Charge of the Zoological Survey of India in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands writes that the soft-shell found in the Andamans has been identified as Lissemys punctata granosa. He adds that a specimen of Naja naja kaouthia was collected from a village near Port Blair.

Snake Service

The Snake Park's snake catching service for Madras is flourishing. In 1980 we had 94 'SNAKE!' calls from terrified residents and removed 33 snakes from houses and gardens. In 1981 there were 119 calls and 45 snakes were caught and brought to the park.

Freshwater turtles

While sea turtles have received a fair amount of attention in recent years in India freshwater turtles have largely been ignored except when in a curry. The Wildlife Act of 1972 lists only the species which are all commercially used but by no means near as rare and unknown as for instance, Heosemys silvatica or Kachuga kachuga.

The Wildlife Act listing for Schedule I (Part II) includes these freshwater turtles: Trionyx gangeticus, Lissemys punctata, Kachuga teeta and Trionyx hurum. Melanochelys tricarinata and all Testudinidae and Trionychidae are listed in Schedule IV. Batagur which may be extinct or Geoclemys, Cyclemys among other rare species are not protected.

In the north, freshwater turtles mostly Trionyx gangeticus and Chitra indica are extensively used for meat and thousands turn up in, for instance, the 20 or so markets around Calcutta. In November-December, at low water the prices drop from Rs.18/- to Rs.5/- per kg; turtle meat is then cheaper even than beef. Hunting devices include hooks and using a long pole with a nail at one end to jab river beds. Nets are also used. In the Sunderbans, local fishermen described Batagur baska and said these were occasionally caught in offshore nets during November-December.

Freshwater turtles are an important food resource and as cheap and readily available protein for poor people are an excellent proposition. But there is a need to investigate the current large-scale usage. From all accounts numbers brought into markets decrease year by year; it is obvious that the industry must be regulated and limited to a reasonable number.

Perhaps easily reared species such as Lissemys can be commercially farmed? The long incubation period would try one's patience but the rewards would compensate.

Freshwater turtles in U.P/Bihar

J. Vijaya, currently in West Bengal, has just returned from U.P and Bihar. Below are some extracts from a letter dated 31 December.

Gorakhpur, U.P

We chose to spend time in Gorakhpur because it is (fairly) easily accessible from Calcutta and the Rapti River flows through it. There are many turtle dealers here. Some turtles are sent to Assam through Siliguri but most are sent to Bengal. Each dealer collects turtles from his agents, who in turn are supplied by turtle catchers. The species found here are Chitra indica, Trionyx gangeticus, Trionyx leithi, Hardella thurgi, Kachuga dhongoka, Kachuga tecta tecta, Kachuga tentoria circumdata, Kachuga smithi.

According to one catcher, turtle catching is fast becoming an art in U.P with sophisticated techniques from Bihar being adopted by hunters. There is a preference for Trionyx gangeticus at the markets and the eggs and meat are sold. Chitra indica, the narrow-headed turtle is getting scarce in W. Bengal, Bihar and U.P. It is called the "Cheem kachim".

The usual "market turtles" are T. gangeticus, T. leithi, C. indica, H. thurgi, and K. dhongoka being easily available and growing to large sizes.

From conversations at Howrah Railway Station (Calcutta) it appears that in the season (winter) at least 10 baskets with 10-20 turtles each arrive from U.P every day. One catcher explained that the quest for turtles for Calcutta markets first led to Bihar and has now spread to U.P. It has become a competitive and extensive business with at least 20 agents from the Rapti sending turtles to Bengal alone.

Turtle catching

1. T. gangeticus is sometimes caught by piercing a hook into the carapace. Divers chase the turtles either underwater or by boat.
2. More often they are baited on a row of hooks stretched across the water. Captured turtles are turned over, their feet stitched together and stacked under boat seats. Curved hooks are used for softshells and needle-shaped ones for emydines.
3. Lissemys punctata, widely preferred and eaten, is essentially a still water species found in tanks and ponds. These are drying up in this season and all are covered with water hyacinth. Lissemys burrow about 3" below the water bed and are caught by feeling for them with hands and legs.

Ten years back 40-70 kg softshells were common but today the average weight is 5-10 kg.

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In Patna the railway parcel officials told me that turtles are not sent from Patna city but turtles sent from Delhi etc. "pass through" Here most wholesale fish merchants are also in the turtle business. As in most other markets we found that turtles were specified by their weights, the length of time they can live in captivity, whether they bite, etc.

Sea turtles

At Digha, W. Bengal, turtles are openly caught at sea; 200-300 /sea per day. I had come to Digha to enquire about Batagur baska. In Udaipur village on the Orissa - West Bengal border people talk knowledgeably of a "Ram kachim" which some villagers have kept as pets for 8-10 years. They say it is very rare, is found in the sea but does not have flippers.

J. Vijaya

MSPT

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WWF-India initiated a year-long project intended to locate additional areas where sea turtles lay their eggs and to collect data relevant to turtle conservation. The surveys, undertaken on foot by Satish Bhaskar, covered about 1300 km of India's coastline including 500 km in the state of Gujarat.

TURTLE TRACKING IN GUJARAT

My visit to Gujarat in June-July 1977 on a sea turtle survey on behalf of the Madras Snake Park allowed me to look briefly over several beaches where sea turtles nested, and I then looked for an opportunity to revisit the more promising areas in the hope of observing and photographing turtles as they laid eggs.

Uninhabited Bhaidar island in the Gulf of Kutch was my particular favourite for though only six sea turtles -- all Olive ^{Ridleys} -- had come ashore during the two nights I had spent there, about a quarter of the island's 2 km-long sandy beach was littered with sea turtle egg shells. Sea turtles bury their eggs to depths reaching down to nearly a metre below the sand surface; the presence of the egg shells on the beach surface therefore intrigued me for I knew that predators like jackals and monitor lizards (and humans!) that unearth and consume sea turtle eggs did not exist on Bhaidar. The numerous but small ghost crabs living on the beach do eat sea turtle eggs and hatchlings but could safely be exempted from responsibility for the carnage because of its sheer scale. Wild cats are reported to live on Bhaidar. I had never seen any but had come across a few of their small tracks on the beach and smelt the pungent, gamy odour of their nest-like retreats among tall grasses in the island's interior. But their numbers appeared to be too small to explain the abundance of eggshells on the beach, on the assumption that they are capable of excavating sea turtle eggs -- and I have no information that they can. The inside of many of the egg shells were stained yellow or orange, obviously because the yolk they once contained had dried within. This had raised the possibility that they derived from sea turtle clutches that had been excavated accidentally during nest-construction by turtles that had inadvertently selected as their laying sites the sites of clutches deposited earlier by other turtles. If so, the density of turtles nesting on the island would be high, perhaps approaching the level of a small "arribada" (the term used for populations of sea turtles that nest en masse).

I was fortunate to get an opportunity to verify this four years later during a survey of the island for World Wildlife Fund-India.

On a bleak, rainy and windy day in August, a hired 3-man crew and I set out in a fishing sailboat from Beyt island in the Gulf of Kutch for Bhaidar, about 6 hours away. I planned on staying alone on Bhaidar for 5 days to survey sea turtles; the island had no potable water so I carried two jerrycans of water besides rations. A delay in starting out from Beyt resulted in the tide being too low to manoeuvre the boat while approaching Bhaidar in the shallows surrounding it. The shallows extend outwards from the island for a few kilometres; it being the crew's first trip to Bhaidar, they were understandably loth to risk their boat on the submerged reefs. I was obliged to 'disembark' in hip-deep sea water and wade $1\frac{1}{2}$ km to the island carrying my supplies while the boat crew hastily sailed away for deeper water and was lost to sight. Feeling sea-sick and fervently hoping that I would not encounter deep water while wading and be compelled to jettison my food, I soon got bogged down in knee-deep mud. Progress through this was extremely slow and exhausting and necessitated frequent halts to regain breath.

Eventually reaching the island, I flopped fown on an incredibly inviting sandy beach near a mangrove swamp. Twenty minutes later I got up unsteadily to locate a place to pitch my tent. A bottle containing a note embossed with the insignia of the Military Sealift Command (Atlantic) of the U.S. Navy had been washed ashore a short while earlier. Half-expecting the bottle to be a device to test sea currents, with perhaps a reward awaiting its finder, I carefully photographed it and extricated the note which said :

Help me

Get me off this ship I am abt to go crazy. I need help please.
Please return this letter and where found. Tossed July 12th 1981.

The message bore a name and a Massachusetts address. While the wording and the smell in the bottle strongly suggested that its late owner had been celebrating, here was a chance to learn something about the direction and speed of the currents the turtles nesting at Bhaidar might utilize or encounter -- I had found the note exactly a month after its being cast out and needed only to know the exact location where it had been dropped.

The next night I was looking at my first Ridleys laying their eggs at Bhaidar. One turtle accidentally excavated the eggs of another.

Four days later, my rations ran out because some of it had spoiled. Fortunately, the next day, despite rough weather, my sailboat crew arrived as scheduled at high tide and we left Bhaidar to its rightful owners -- the turtles, birds and crabs.

Satish Bhaskar
c/o WWF-India