

# THE OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLES (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) OF SUNDARBANS COAST

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## Introduction

The Sundarbans mangrove forest is situated in the south-western part of Bangladesh between latitudes 21°27'30" and 22°30'00" North and longitudes 89°02'00" and 90°00'00" East. The total area of the Sundarbans is about 601,700 ha, and has been under the management of the Forest Department since 1884. There are 32 species of mammals, 8 species of amphibians, 14 species of turtles, 30 species of snakes, 35 species of other reptiles, 186 species of birds, 120 species of fishes, and 334 species of plants. The Sundarbans mangrove forest is the home of the world famous Royal Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris*). There are three protected areas in the Sundarbans, known as the East, South and West sanctuaries, which were declared as World Heritage sites in 1997 by Unesco. The area of the sanctuaries is about one-third of the total area of the Sundarbans.

## Distribution

Olive Ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea* Eschscholtz, 1829) is an important aquatic animal often found in the marine zone of the Sundarbans mangrove forests, normally along the coast of the Bay of Bengal and sometimes a little deeper inside the estuary. It was reported that the Olive Ridley turtle used to nest on the sandy beaches of Dimer Char (opposite Kachikhali), Kachikhali, Dimer Char (the north side of Aloor Kool) and the Mandarbarta areas of the Sundarbans in February and March. The Olive Ridley turtles visiting the Sundarbans in the winter are often caught in the fishing nets and brought to shore either dead or exhausted. They also nest regularly on the sandy beaches of Inoni, St. Martins, Sonadia and Maheskhal islands of Cox's Bazar district, along the eastern coast of the country. The nesting here takes place in November.

## Habitat

The wildlife sanctuaries are situated along the southern coast of the Bay of Bengal from east to west. The length of the coast from Bogi in the east to Panir Khal in the west is about 110 km. The turtle breeding grounds are located in these sanctuaries. The fishermen used to stay all along the shore, mostly on the sandy beaches of the sanctuary in the winter season from mid-October to the end of February. They prefer sandy beaches for easy access, natural facilities to dry fish, and also to a certain extent because of the availability of fresh water. The seasonal activities of fishermen on sandy beaches restricts the nesting of turtles to a great extent. There have been sporadic reports of nesting by turtles at different parts of the sanctuaries every year, but it was not considered to be a routine phenomenon. The nests were often destroyed by predators – mainly wild boars (*Sus scrofa*) and lizards (*Varanus* spp.) Beginning in the winter of 1998, fishing was banned within the sanctuary jurisdiction and the fishermen were not allowed to settle temporarily on the sandy beaches for the same purpose. This has brought about positive results in the nesting of the Olive Ridley turtles, which is discussed in this paper.

## Mandarbaria Breeding Ground

The Mandarbaria marine turtle nesting ground is located at the extreme western point of the Sundarbans west sanctuary. Here, the sandy beach has always been used by the fishermen. According to information from the office of the Divisional Forest Officer, Sundarbans Forest Division, about 500 fishermen used to stay on the beach for fishing in the winter season every year. As a result, the turtles could not reach the beach for nesting, but instead were caught in fishing nets and drowned to death. The nesting of turtles was recorded at the Mandarbaria