

Survey of marine turtles along the coast of Maharashtra and Goa

Varad Giri

Bombay Natural History Society

Hornbill House, Dr. Salim Ali Chowk, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023

Email:bnhs@bom4.vsnl.net.in

A preliminary survey was carried out to study the present status of sea turtles along the coast of Maharashtra and Goa from May 13 – 31, 2000. An intensive survey was carried out along the coastal region of these states from 4th December to 22nd December 2000.

Two sites, Morjim and Galjibaga were visited during this survey with Mr. Paresh Porob, the local resource person in Goa. A total of 34 localities in Maharashtra were visited. Some of the important sites visited in the preliminary survey were also visited during this survey to collect recent information. In this survey more importance was given to areas which are less populated and less disturbed. Schools and colleges located in the coastal villages or towns were visited to collect information and to distribute reply cards. Mr. Prakash Gole, a well known conservationist in Pune, who has done a study on the marine biodiversity of the coastal region of Maharashtra informed us that sea turtles used to nest on most of the beaches on the coast of Maharashtra.

Goa

In Goa the Forest Department has created a lot of awareness about marine turtles. They have initiated conservation of marine turtles by protecting the nesting sites of Olive Ridley's on two beaches viz. Morjim and Galjibaga. Both these sites were visited during this survey. At Morjim, 16 nests are protected. The nesting density is more towards the river mouth. It is an approximately 200 meters stretch, which is immediately backed by a Casuarina plantation. On the remaining beach the plantation is not very close. Some hotels are present on the beach. In December 2000, a visit was also made to the Galgibaga beach. This is one of the less populated

beaches on the coast of Goa. Here the beach is immediately backed by large sand dunes with Casuarina plantation. According to recent information, 18 nests were protected on this beach.

A reporter of a local daily also described hatchlings with white spots and identified them as leatherback hatchlings from a picture, but this cannot be confirmed.

Maharashtra

Out of the five species of sea turtles found in India, four species are known to occur in Maharashtra waters. In the preliminary survey the locals of some villages were told to keep the carapaces of dead turtles if found on the beach. In the present survey the carapaces of three species viz. Olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) were collected from the locals of different villages in Maharashtra. A carapace collected at Achara (Malvan) is difficult to identify. According to some fishermen, Leatherback locally called 'Kurma' or 'Satpotya' is also seen but are very rare and seen in the deep sea. The olive ridley is present along the entire coast of Maharashtra and this is the common species on this coast. The population of Green turtles is more near Malvan. In the village Neevati, which is close to Malvan three carapaces of green turtles and three carapaces of olive ridley were seen. The turtles got entangled in the fishing nets and died and some were found dead on the beach. Another village called Khavane about 4 km. from Neevati was also visited. The locals of this village informed us that in the last four months, 8 to 9 turtles got entangled in fishing nets and died. Here four carapaces of green turtles were seen on the outskirts of the village. As per

the information given by the locals, the local fishermen release the turtles if they get in the fishing nets but most of them die due to suffocation. The percentage of people eating sea turtles is little more in these two villages compared to the other villages in the Sindhudurg district. A small carapace of green turtle (SCL – 45 cm) was seen with one of the locals in the village Kelus which is about 15 km. from Neevati. While asking about the green turtles the locals told us that these turtles prefer the rocky substratum and mostly feed on the algae. Some localities in the Ratnagiri district also have a record of green turtles but the number is very low. A carapace of hawksbill was collected from one local from Nandivade near Jayagad. This turtle was captured in a fishing net two months ago very close to the shore.

The number of sea turtles killed for meat is high in Ratnagiri district compared to the other coastal districts in Maharashtra because most of the turtles entangled in the nets were killed here for meat. In most of the villages visited in this district, sea turtles were killed for their meat. In Sindhudurg and Raigad district most of the people release them if they get caught in the net. They believe that sea turtles are an avatar and if caught in the net they perform a prayer and release the turtle. According to the information collected along the coast of Maharashtra, nesting of sea turtles has drastically declined in the last 10 years. This year, only a few localities near Malvan have a record of 4 to 5 nests and on the entire coast of Maharashtra there are sporadic records of nesting. The beach of about 6 km. between Shiroda and Motemal near Sawantwadi and the patch between Sarjekot and Achara near Malvan which is about 7 km. are the important nesting sites of olive ridleys and green turtles. Mr. Vasudev S. Kamale, fisherman from Achara told us that he had seen leatherback on this beach 5 years ago and he remembered it because of its large size and ridges on the back. The locals of the villages visited in this area informed us that 10 years ago, in the breeding season, about 7 to 8 turtles were nesting per night but now the number is very less.

In Kashid, a small village in Raigad district, the Headmaster of the primary school told us that in the first week of January some students brought the hatchlings of marine turtles in the morning collected on the same beach. The Headmaster went to the beach and saw some of more hatchlings. The hatchlings were collected and released immediately. Only sporadic nesting is recorded from Raigad district this year. The beach between Ambolgad and Vetye in Ratnagiri district is good for nesting of Olive Ridley as this is a less disturbed patch.

Threats

1) Egg poaching: The main threat to the population of sea turtle on the coast of Maharashtra is from egg poaching. The eggs are consumed by humans along the entire coast. Most of this year's nesting records are from poached nests. The locals informed us that if the eggs are not removed, they are consumed by stray dogs, foxes etc. About 4 to 5 years ago, eggs were sold in the market but nowadays as the nesting has decreased the eggs are consumed by the person who collects them and if his family is small, he distributes them in the village.

2) Incidental catch: Fishing is intensively carried out all along the Maharashtra coast. There are records of turtles getting in the nets but in most of the localities they are released immediately. But in some areas of Sindhudurg district and most of the localities in Ratnagiri district, the turtles are caught for meat. The average percentage of incidental catch is 4 to 5 turtles per trawler per year. According to information given by some trawler owners and local fishermen, there is no decline in the population of marine turtles because they are plenty in the sea but due to increased fishing activities and the human disturbances on the beaches, the turtles are not coming ashore to nest.

Future Plan

1. As most of the beaches on the coast of Thane and Bombay districts are populated and the

nesting records are also sporadic, a visit is to be made to these areas to collect recent records.

2. In the present survey a visit was made to some of the forest offices and fisheries offices, and

information is to be collected from the remaining offices through post.

3. An awareness campaign is to be carried out in some of the villages on the coast of Maharashtra.

CONSERVATION AND LIVELIHOODS NETWORK

5th Consultation on Wildlife Conservation and People's Livelihood Rights April 8-10, 2001, Makaibari Tea Estate, Kurseong, West Bengal

INVITATION

For the past few years there have been attempts at various levels across the country to bring together people who represent the cause of wildlife conservation on one hand and human rights activists, particularly those working with forest and other natural resource dependent communities, on the other. In the past these constituencies have often been in conflict with each other over issues of wildlife conservation versus local people's livelihood rights. One of the efforts in this direction have been the National Annual Consultations on Wildlife Conservation and People's Livelihood Rights that have been held for the last four years.

The first two were held at Tarun Bharat Sangh, Alwar District, Rajasthan in April 1997 and April 1998. The third consultation was held at Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, in May 1999, while the fourth one was held in the BR Hills in Karnataka in April, 2000.

The objective of these consultations has been to provide a forum for constructive interaction among the various interest groups; to provide an opportunity to learn about the strengths and concerns about each other; and to work towards joint strategies for action against the larger threats to the habitats that support both wildlife and local communities. We have attempted to involve people from NGOs, communities and the government in these discussions.

The 5th in this series of Consultation is being held from April 8-10, 2001 in the Makaibari Tea Estate in Kurseong, West Bengal . It is being co-organised by Kalpavriksh and the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment - Eastern Himalaya Programme (ATREE-EHP), with assistance from the North Eastern Society for the Protection of Nature and Wildlife (NESPON) and the Makaibari Tea Estate (MTE).

Those who want to participate or give inputs should please contact:

Pankaj Sekhsaria

Kalpavriksh

Apt. 5, Shree Dutta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411 004

Phone/Fax: 020 5654239

Email: pankajs@vsnl.com / kvriksh@vsnl.com