

Bwari Pandar

STUDIES ON THE MASS NESTING (ARRIBADA) OF PACIFIC
RIDLEY TURTLES, *LEPIDOCHELYS OLIVACEA* IN
BHITARKANIKA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, ORISSA, INDIA

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Introduction

Mass nesting or arribada (a Spanish term meaning-arrival) of sea turtles take place in Orissa coast between the mouth of the Maipura river and Gahirmatha of Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary in Cuttack District of Orissa. The place is popularly known as Gahirmatha beach, which is about 35 km long stretch and it is the largest sea turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) rookery in the whole world (Bustard, 1974, 1976).

Nesting of turtles at Gahirmatha occurs throughout the year with a variation on a number of solitary nesting ridley from one to one hundred. Mass nesting or arribada (more than 1000 turtles visit for nesting in a particular night on a stretch of less than 10 km of sea beach) usually occurs twice in a nesting season during the period late December to April.

Past History

The mass nesting of Pacific Ridley turtles have been taking place since long past at Gahirmatha beach. Before and after the Kanika Zamindary time, there has been large scale exploitation of turtle eggs. The eggs of sea turtles were allowed to be collected in Bhitarkanika on a royalty of Rs. 15 per boat load. A nominal amount of

about Rs. 360 per annum was obtained as revenue by this process. Actual egg number legally exported are difficult to ascertain but royalty payments were based on boat loads. An estimated 5-15 lakh eggs were legally exported annually before 1974 (Kanungo, 1976).

Poaching of live turtles in the offshore during the period of mating (October to December) and at the time of nesting (late December to April) were also rampant. The poachers come to Gahirmatha coast for poaching of live sea turtles from sea with help of nylon nets and powerful trawlers. Following Bustard's (FAO, 1975) recommendation, the Orissa Forest Department took very prompt action for (i) protection of turtle eggs at the nesting beach and turtles, both onshore and offshore, and (ii) conducting research on population of nesting female turtles, nest/nesting and associated behaviours. During 1975-76 turtle nesting season, for the first time, an enumeration was carried out at Gahirmatha beach and it was assessed that over 1.5 lakh female turtles visited the beach for nesting and egg laying.

Present Status

The Pacific ridley sea turtles have been included in the Schedule-1 of the

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