



MARINE FISHERIES INFORMATION SERVICE

**TECHNICAL AND
EXTENSION SERIES**

No.33
November, December 1981

**CENTRAL MARINE FISHERIES RESEARCH INSTITUTE
COCHIN, INDIA**

INDIAN COUNCIL OF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

ON THE RARE OCCURRENCE OF A GIANT SIZED HAWKSBILL TURTLE OFF ELEPHANTA CAVES (NEAR BOMBAY)*

A turtle weighing 80 kg was caught in a 18.3 m long and sturdy drift net (called "Jali" in Maharashtra) operated off Elephanta Caves, a rocky and sandy sea resort of historical and tourist interest about 18 km south of Bombay, on 2-9-1981.

This turtle (Fig. 1) was reported to have been caught, accidentally, by a fisherman Shri Vaman Kusha Koli of Trombay, coinciding with a festival day of Ganesh Chaturthi while he was hauling his drift nets. As the turtle was struggling for its escape

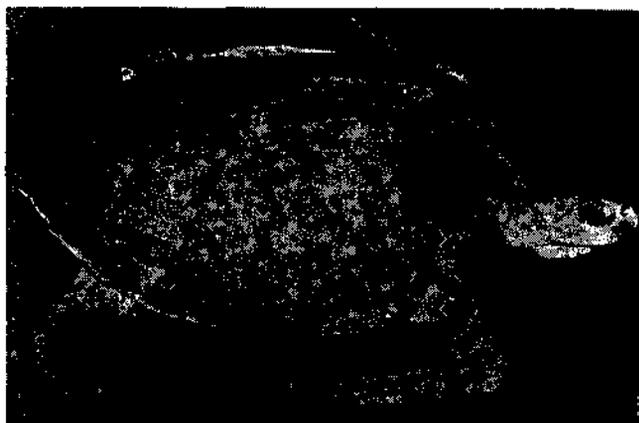


Fig. 1. The hawksbill turtle, *Eretmochelys imbricata* (Linnaeus) caught off Elephanta Caves (near Bombay)

from the net, the fisherman had to cast another net to control the wildly struggling creature for its inescapable watery journey from Elephanta Caves to a fishing village near Trombay where it was kept alive in captivity.

The following observations were made on the morphometry of the turtle as well as other interesting characteristics of the animal, which was identified as *Eretmochelys imbricata* (Linnaeus):

| | | |
|---|-----|---------|
| 1. Total length of the turtle from snout to the tail | ... | 1213 mm |
| 2. The length of carapace | ... | 783 mm |
| 3. Width of the carapace along the curvature | ... | 613 mm |
| 4. Width of the carapace in a straight line | ... | 448 mm |
| 5. The length of plastron | ... | 438 mm |
| 6. Number of barnacles and other epizootic organisms on the carapace and head | ... | 8 nos. |
| 7. Number of costal scutes | ... | 4 pairs |

- | | | |
|---|-----|---------|
| 8. Number of inframarginal scutes | ... | 4 pairs |
| 9. Length of ear-like foreflipper | ... | 348 mm |
| 10. Number of pre-frontal scales | ... | 2 pairs |
| 11. Total weight of the turtle | ... | 80 kg |
| 12. The scutes were very thick, measuring about 5 mm thickness. | | |
| 13. Head was narrow, parallel-sided and with the jaws meeting at a highly acute angle, which facilitates extraction of food organisms from crevices in coral reefs. | | |
| 14. Nuchal scute was separated from the first costal scute. | | |
| 15. The colouration of the dorsal scutes was attractive with radiating streaks of brown and black in an amber substrate. | | |
| 16. The plastral scutes were orange-yellow in colour. | | |
| 17. Jaw surfaces were not serrated and the bill was bird-like. | | |
| 18. The scales of head and forelimbs were very distinct, each being dark-brown with a light border. | | |

It was a female specimen and she got entangled in the drift net, presumably, during her nocturnal egg-laying journey towards the rocky and sandy shore of Elephanta Caves-which serves as an ideal nesting place for hawksbill turtle.

The turtle was kept alive under captivity, for six days in the ante-room of a fairly large house of the captor of the turtle, who regarded the capture of turtle as auspicious and labelled it as "Sea God", duly worshipped by the offering of rice and vermilion.

Since the animal was registering its protest of the captivity by starvation and there was no possibility of keeping it in the local zoo because of the restrictions under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, it was released back into the sea on September 7, after six days of its capture.

Earlier records of hawksbill turtle reveal that it grows upto 724 mm in carapace length and weighing 50 kg as reported off Jabal Azig Island, in the Gulf of Aden. The present record of the hawksbill from the Arabian Sea off Bombay appears to be the highest both in carapace length and weight.

Grateful thanks are expressed to Dr. E. G. Silas and Dr. S. Ramamurthy for kindly going through the manuscript critically.

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