

Turtle Conservation in Konkan, Maharashtra, India

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The occurrence and sporadic nesting of olive ridleys is reported along the entire coast of Maharashtra. The major threats to the marine turtles of Maharashtra are from poaching of eggs and adults, incidental catch in fishing nets and due to developmental activities along the coast (Giri and Chaturvedi, 2003). The nesting population has been decreasing due to poaching by man & predation of eggs by the jackal (*Canis aureus*). While on survey for the whitebellied sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) in February 2002, we found 35 nests of turtles along 3 km beach of Velas, Mandangad taluka, Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra. All the nests were empty. Poaching of nests is a regular practice in some of the villages. Locals said that all the eggs were eaten by jackals. Nesting appeared to be good, but eggs were threatened by humans and animals. Hence Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra, Chiplun, (SNM) started a marine turtle conservation project from 2002.

SNM is a registered organization working in nature conservation, nature education and nature research since 1992 in Konkan. Recently, SNM investigated and stopped the smuggling of Indian swiftlet (*Collocalia unicolor*) nests in South Konkan. SNM also successfully completed a status survey of the whitebellied sea eagle in Konkan and is now working for the conservation of the species. SNM regularly undertakes programmes in nature education like nature trail, nature camps, workshops and exhibitions.

SNM started its turtle conservation campaign in Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra from 1st October 2002. Awareness programs among locals were carried out in 45 villages of the 162 km coastline of the Ratnagiri district. Information sheets were distributed at meetings in each village, and boards were fixed on important beaches. Additionally, letters were sent to each village panchayat asking them to protect marine turtles, their eggs and hatchlings. The local Forest department also assisted in the project.

At Velas, about 130 km from Chiplun, SNM has undertaken actual field work. This small village is

mainly dependent on agriculture, with no fishing activity. A small river divides the village and *Casuarina* plantation on the seashore. The beach is minimally populated. Using G.I. mesh and wooden poles, a rectangular hatchery (8 m x 3m X 1m) was erected at the southern side of the beach just above high tide line. To avoid injury by the mesh to hatchlings, the hatchery was lined with a cardboard sheet at bottom. To protect hatchling from avian predators, the hatchery was covered by chicken mesh. A person was appointed to look after the hatchery, and SNM team members frequently visited the project. Local persons and our volunteers walked the 3 km beach at dawn to locate turtle nests. Eggs were collected and relocated in the hatchery. Each nest was numbered and associated data noted. On tentative dates of hatching, the nests were carefully observed, and hatchlings released immediately after emergence.

During the 2002- 2003 season, the first two nests were recorded on December 10, 2002, and last one on 26th February 2003. A total of 50 nests were located and relocated in the hatchery. Out of a total of 5372 eggs, 2734 hatchlings were released with a hatching success of 50.89 %. All nests were of the olive ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea* (Table 1). During the breeding season, 5 turtles returned to sea without nesting. Due to wave action, a 0.60 m high and 200m long sandy wall was formed on beach. This obstructed many turtles from the beach. One dead green turtle *Chelonia mydas* was seen on the beach.

Table 1: Month wise nests, eggs and hatchlings.

Month	No of nests	No of eggs	Hatchlings
December 2002	25	2906	0
January 2003	19	1975	179
February 2003	6	491	1210
March 2003	Nil	0	1157
April 2003	Nil	0	188
Total	50	5372	2734

This is the first sea turtle conservation programme in Maharashtra, and was sponsored by WWF-India, Kolhapur Division, Barve Trust, Pune and many other NGOs and individuals. Locals from Velas Village, Sarpanch and Village Panchayat also helped us in the project. SNM now plans to spread this project to the entire coast of Maharashtra. With the help of locals and the government, we are undertaking sea turtle conservation at 10 to 15 sites in 2003- 2004.

References

GIRI, V. & N. CHATURVEDI (2003) Status of marine turtles in Maharashtra, India. *Kachhapa* 8: 11-15.

TCP, Sri Lanka initiates a new in-situ turtle nest protection programme

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The Turtle Conservation Project (TCP) has launched a new programme to ensure the survival of sea turtles in their natural habitat on the Kosgoda Beach, southwest of Sri Lanka. An extent of 4 kms. of the Kosgoda Beach has become very important due to the fact that five of the seven species of sea turtles – including the green Turtle, the leatherback turtle, the loggerhead turtle, the hawksbill turtle and the olive ridley turtle - frequent this beach annually for nesting.

Coastal communities living along this stretch of beach have made a livelihood on marine turtles by collecting turtle eggs for consumption as well as for sale. Between 500 and 600 turtle nests are deposited annually in Kosgoda and all of them are collected by the poachers and sold to hatcheries or for consumption.

TCP selected 1 km of the Kosgoda beach (which has the highest nesting density) for in-situ conservation of marine turtles while 3 km of the beach stretch would be free for the turtle hatcheries to collect the eggs and to continue with the ex-situ conservation projects. 15 local persons who had engaged themselves in collecting turtle-eggs for sale were engaged in the project's "Nest Protectors" scheme. In introducing the concept of sustainable development

of this marine resource, the TCP has drawn up a plan to transform these egg collectors to 'nest-protectors'. They will also be trained as tour guides for the "Turtle night watch" tourism programme with the assistance of the Ministry of Tourism and the Sri Lanka Tourist Board as a means to providing them with an alternative income source.

The TCP's Kosgoda in-situ marine turtle nest protection and the community development programme is funded by the SGP/GEF of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Sri Lanka and assisted by the Sri Lanka Tourist Board. The opening ceremony of this programme was held on August 7, 2003. TCP believes that this latest programme will ensure the further conservation of marine turtles while helping to uplift the living standards of the fisher communities in the area.

For further details of this programme and for volunteer opportunities please contact:

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