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Leatherback turtle released into the sea at Vizhinjam in Kerala, India

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Of the five species of the sea turtle occurring in the Indian waters, the leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) popularly known as *eluvai amai*, or *thoni amai* in Tamil, is rare along the Indian mainland. Four species, the olive ridley, green turtle, the hawksbill and leatherback, are known from Kerala waters. However, all except the olive ridley are rare or uncommon. The nesting of leatherback turtle along the Kerala coast has been reported near Quilon by Cameron (1923) and near Calicut by Jones (1959). Strandings of leatherback turtles have been reported along the coast by several authors. Incidental landings of leatherback turtle recorded during the period 1923 - 2003 are given chronologically (Table 1). There are thirteen published reports of the leatherback turtle on the Indian mainland; this the smallest of the specimens reported.

The present note is an account of an accidentally caught male leatherback turtle in shore - seine at Kovalam, near Vizhinjam in Kerala. On receiving a telephone call from Kovalam on 03.04.2001 regarding the capture of a large turtle in shore - seine, one of the authors paid a visit to the site. In the landing center the turtle was identified as a male leatherback turtle measuring 116 cm in total length

with a total weight of 110 kg. The carapace measured 93 cm in length and 68 cm in width. The turtle looked inactive due to the prolonged struggle in the sea to extricate itself from the shore seine.

Many tourists, including foreigners assembled at the spot to see the turtle struggling for life. On seeing that the fisherman were trying to butcher it for its meat, a foreign tourist (a woman) started negotiating with the fisherman for its safe release in to the sea. Finally, their negotiations concluded at Rs.2000 for the release of the turtle into the sea. Again on 8.4.2001 the turtle was recaptured in the same area by the same crew, but seeing that it was the turtle they had released on 3.4.2001 at the request of the foreign tourist, the fisherman released the turtle into the sea.

Shoals of oil sardine are frequently noted along the Vizhinjam coast during March - April period, and there is a some possibility that leatherback turtles follow the shoals and come close to the shore where shore-seine operation is quite regular during this season.

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Table 1: Records of leatherback turtles on the Indian Mainland from 1923 -2003

Sl. No	Year	Place	CCL (cm)	CCW (cm)	PL (cm)	PW (cm)	FFL (cm)	HFL (cm)	HL	Sex	WT (kg)	Gear	References
1	1923	Off Quilon, Kerala	212.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	F	272.4	-	Cameron, 1923
2	1959	Calicut, Kerala	190.5	-	116.8	-	-	-	-	F	-	-	Jones, 1959
3	1976	Visakhapatnam Andhra Pradesh											
4	1982	Kovalam, Tamil Nadu	195	119	162	102	110	85	-	F	-	Washed	Rajagopalan, 1983
5	1985	Malavan, Maharashtra	149.8	109	142.5	72.5	-	-	-	F	-	Washed	Karbhari, 1985
6	1988	Mandapam, Tamil Nadu	152	81	144.5	83	96	58	-	M	260	Gillnet	Rao <i>et al.</i> , 1989
7	1989	Pamban, Tamil Nadu	162	86	150	87	102	78	37	F	300	Trawl net	Pillai & Kasinathan, 1989
8	1991	Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu	174	120	-	-	180	-	34	F	350	Trawl net	Pillai <i>et al.</i> , 1995
9	1991	Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu	173.2	132.4	154.7	86	107	68.8	39.1	F	250	Boat seine	Ebenezer & Joel, 1992
10	1998	Vizhinijam, Kerala	150	-	108	78	100	78	39	M	250	Gillnet	Pillai & Thiagarajan, 2000
11	2001	Kovalam, Kerala	93	68	-	-	-	-	-	M	110	Shore seine	present observation
12	2002	Vizhinijam, Kerala	141	106	-	-	-	-	24	F	-	Gillnet	Pillai, 2003
13	2003	Pallithura, Kerala	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	F	-	Shore seine	Pillai, 2003

CCL - Curved Carapace Length; CCW - Curved Carapace Width; PL - Plastron Length; PW - Plastron Width; FFL - Foreflipper Length; HFL - Hind Flipper Length; HL - Head Length