

CONSERVATION

PROJECT TURTLE - SAVE IT FROM EXTINCTION

It is a bright moonlit night. We walk along the shores of the beach, playfully dodging the waves, our eyes focussed on the shore for flipper marks. The cool breeze is caressing while we try to catch the curious shining anemones that float ashore. Savouring the world in all its beauty, our group consisting of thirty, is walking along the shores with a purpose.

The coast is dotted with small clusters of fishermen's colonies. They stop us to enquire, what we are doing here, late at night. We explain our purpose. They understand and allow us to continue, for it is not easy and safe to walk these shores at night.

We are on the turtle trail. Our purpose is to collect the turtle eggs from the shores and take them to a safe place that we have constructed - the hatchery. It is safe from humans and animal predators. After a duration of 48 to 50 days, the eggs hatch. It is wonderful to see the hatchlings climb out of their nest, one by one. We help them to climb up safely. We are ecstatic when they begin to crawl and amazedly watch as their instinct guides them towards the sea, their future home, which they have never seen until now, with ease.

It is one of the wonders of nature. The sea turtle is one of the <sup>oldest</sup> custodians among the living things and has been existing in this world even before mankind was evolved. It had once been a land dweller, the reason why it comes ashore year after year, through the generations to nest on the shores of the sea. It leaves the clutches of 100 to 150 eggs in a potlike hole that it digs with

its flippers; gently covering it with loose sand, convinced of a job well done. After the gestation period, the hatchlings climb out of their nest and reach back to where they belong - the sea, or do they? Well, if they have a chance to survive from the hungry animals, who arrive in time to devour them or humans who whisk them off as eggs, either to consume or to sell to the nearby hotels.

Today, the sea turtle has been listed as one of the endangered species. It may disappear from the face of the earth altogether, without a trace. Renowned organisations like the 'Greenpeace' and other voluntary agencies all over the globe have launched campaigns to save the turtle from the grim jaws of extinction. Many countries have signed a treaty known as the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of flora and fauna), through which they have pledged to protect the lives of not only the turtle but other endangered animals and plants as well. India is also a member.

Reasons are plenty that lead to the depleting turtle population. Natural predators have always been there but it is in the hands of the human beings that the gentle reptile faces death threat. The ever avaricious man seems to have an insatiable appetite for anything that is turtle, whether it is its delicious flesh, delectable jewellery from its shell or decorative leather goods. Besides, the digging for oil in the sea, removal of sand for construction, mushrooming of buildings and resorts, indiscriminate fishing, destroying mangroves along the shores have all played a villainous role leading to this pathetic plight.

The turtles come ashore to nest during the months of November to March. The nesting season is known as the 'arribada'. These shy reptiles shun and fear human habitation, especially close to the shores. It prevents them from coming ashore.

The bright arc lights atop buildings not only ward off burglars, they also disorient and frighten the turtle populace during the nesting season. These buildings that now crowd all along the coast have not maintained the stipulated fifty meters from the shoreline.

Some of the chemical plants discharge their untreated chemical effluents into the sea killing marine life as their toxin mixes with sea water, running to miles. The turtle, if happens to swim nearby, becomes an immediate victim like the rest of the life in the sea.

The trawlers use synthetic nets and lay too close to the shore and the unsuspecting turtle gets caught. In their efforts to free them, the fishermen accidentally break their flippers. As a result, there are times when we spot a turtle with a missing flipper.

The poverty stricken and the jobless have now begun to consume them, driven by hunger. Sometimes they sell the eggs to the nearby restaurants. They are not aware that this gentle creature is now protected by law. If caught selling, killing or consuming in any other way the law stipulates imprisonment for six months or a fine of Rs.500/=.

The sea turtles come from as far as the Pacific to nest along our shores. India plays a proud host, to a horde of winter visitors from birds to reptiles all along its coast from Orissa to Kutch. Therefore our foremost consideration should be to protect the environment from ruin, to stop destruction of natural habitats in the name of technical development.

The mangroves along the coast are the turtles' favourite nesting spots. We have been systematically destroying them, growing casuarina forests in their

stead, to combat cyclones. In some parts of Kerala, blocking the coastline with granite rocks against erosion and boating have completely wiped out the wintering 'Leatherback' turtle population.

Every living species plays an important role in preserving and maintaining the eco-system. As the superior species, we have to help them live their lives to the full. It is a fallacy on our part, if they are forced to disappear from this world by our own greed and inhuman destruction of natural habitats.

Voluntary organisations have taken up the task of kindling the interest and the responsibility of the public at large, enabling them to study and understand the prevailing conditions, measures to rectify, how each one of them can contribute in a small measure towards conservation.

The Students' Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN) was started two years ago. This enthusiastic voluntary group has helped to successfully release 7000 hatchlings into the sea last year. Besides providing a real life experience in observing and recording marine life activities to students and others, the group has kindled the interest of the public at large who were willing participants in the walks. The group has helped to highlight the various aspects of marine life conservation, to help redeem our past mismanagement. This year too, they invite the public to participate in their walks, and help in any way they can to create an awareness, to propagate and preserve the turtle population. They will be starting the campaign by the middle of December and hope that people from all walks of life will lend their support, as they did last year.

Come, walk with us, join in our mission in conserving and protecting our environs.

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