

Turtles and Tourists – A coastal village in Goa shows the way

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Goa – the name evokes an image of sun, sand, sea and hordes of tourists. Tourists, who bring in their wake mounting garbage and destruction of the local ecology. This picture is true for most of the sandy beaches that Goa is famous for. However, there is a new awareness spreading, especially among the locals and a section of the state government, that this kind of tourism does not last long. That it only leads to the proverbial killing of the goose that lays the golden eggs, and that there are other ways of bringing tourists in.

Morjim beach is one such example of the new kind of tourism taking root in Goa. A little known beach, sandwiched between the more famous Vagator and Hermal beaches in Pernem taluka of North Goa, Morjim is relatively undisturbed - one of the reasons why the olive ridley turtles come to nest here every year. But there have been other contributing factors to this “minor miracle”, as the locals put it. Protecting the gravid turtles and the eggs from being poached, round the clock vigilance by the locals, over the beach to see that the nests remain undisturbed are some of them.

The situation then

Turtle eggs were poached heavily by the locals in Morjim and turtle meat was sold in the local market. It is in this scenario that Capt. Gerard Fernandes came back to settle in his village – Tembawado which fronts Morjim beach and is now in the news for turtle conservation in Goa. Capt. Fernandes decided to settle in his native village after taking voluntary retirement from the Armed Services. He is presently leading the turtle conservation movement, though he intends to slowly allow others to take over. “The movement will not sustain long if the second rung leadership is not allowed to take over”, he explains.

When he moved back, Capt. Fernandes was aghast to see that the village of his childhood memories was fast disappearing under the onslaught of what he terms as “the disease of uncontrolled greed”. Migration to the towns in search of casual labour by once self-supporting families disturbed him, as did the changing traditions and the increasing pressure on the natural resources of Tembawado by the construction and trawler lobby. What alarmed him even more was the increased poaching of turtle eggs from the beach during the nesting season of the olive ridleys on Morjim beach.

The beginning of the participatory protection

The turtle conservation movement in Morjim began in 1995-96, thanks to Capt. Fernandes, his wife, brick layers Domio D’Silva and Prakash Saptoji, and shack owners Gilbert and Dominic Fernandes. There are several other locals, mainly fisherfolk, who are also involved. The conservation movement was a gradual process that involved the Fernandes couple making the locals aware of the importance of conserving sea turtles and how they could use conservation to turn the area into a potential tourist spot. The release of sea turtles from the protected nests in 1995-96 marked a beginning in the turtle conservation movement and subsequently it was reported in the local newspapers. The publicity caught the interest of the State Forest Department, especially the present Deputy Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Mr. C.A. Reddy, and their participation boosted the movement in the subsequent year.

The turtle eggs, which are softer and rounder than poultry eggs fetch a local market price of Rs 3 – 4

per egg while a poultry egg costs one rupee in the same market. Hence it is more lucrative for the fishermen to poach turtle eggs and sell them in the market during the nesting season. Capt. Fernandes decided that if he needed the co-operation of the local villagers to protect the turtles he would have to offer them an economic alternative and not mere rhetoric about wildlife conservation. So he pooled in an amount of Rs. 5,000/- from his personal savings for awards to individuals who reported turtle nesting sites. This weaned the villagers, especially the youth, away from poaching turtle eggs, directly and indirectly. Those who were reported poaching were discouraged from repeating the offence as it led to disgrace in the small community. A breakthrough was achieved when once-expert-poachers such as Bautis Fernandes, late Benjamin Fernandes, Anand Pednekar and Ratnakar Halankar, all fishermen from the village, started reporting on nesting sites that needed to be protected.

The fuss created around the olive ridley turtles caught the attention of the rest of the villagers, apart from some tourists who visited Morjim. "The villagers," says Capt. Fernandes, "have been quick to cash in on this and the shack owners especially have been astute enough to recognise that the quality of foreign tourists coming to the beach has improved." According to him, the tourists seek solitude and peace at Morjim beach away from the crowds of heavily visited spots. The shack owners have responded by not blaring music, keeping the beach clean and thus preventing stray dogs. Turtle conservation is now a means of attracting tourists to this beach. Apart from turtles, dolphins are another source of attraction as also a sizeable number of migratory birds that flock to this area.

Joint wildlife management emerges

The Forest Department joined the effort in 1996-97 by deploying two guards to patrol the beach during the nesting season and assist the village youth in nabbing the poachers. These guards along with 30-40 youth volunteers of the village

have helped in arresting the increase in poaching incidence. The Forest Department has also continued with the award-giving scheme to locals who report nesting sites. Presently an award of Rs. 500/- is given to each volunteer. In recognition of his efforts, Capt. Fernandes was awarded a plaque by the Government of Goa in October 1998 for wildlife preservation. Mr. Reddy's enthusiasm to sustain this effort has taken shape in the form of Project Turtle of the Forest Department of Goa that pays six of the local youth on a daily basis to watch over the beach and report nesting and hatching. A 'Turtle Study Centre' has been set up at Pernem within the campus of the Range Forest Officer, Mr. Phadte, who has also been deeply involved with this movement.

Continuing problems

However, the movement, now in its fifth year, is yet to battle the real threat to the turtles. This is from the construction lobby on the landward side, and the trawler lobby on the seaward side. Capt. Gerard Fernandes had himself faced violence from these forces initially. Now, however, because of the local support that he enjoys, these lobbies have become more cautious.

The adjoining village, Vithaldaswado, shares the same beachfront with Tembawado and hence has turtle nesting sites right up to Ashvem and Harmal village, further north in Pernem taluka. However, the villagers from Vithaldaswado have not responded to the turtle conservation programme in the same manner as those in Tembawado. The landowners along the beachfront fear that the turtle conservation programme would attract stricter implementation of the Coastal Regulation Zone Notification, 1991, here. This could mean that they would not be able to sell their land, especially to the hotel lobby, as the real estate price would go down. Capt. Fernandes has been trying to convince the villagers not to sell their land. Instead, he proposes that they could add an extra floor to their houses, which could be let out to tourists and thus earn good revenue. This way they could

manage to retain their ancestral lands, secure an income through good quality tourism and preserve their environment. The villagers from Tembawado are convinced, but not those from Vithaldaswado.

Although the incidence of nesting appears to be increasing, the past year has witnessed high mortality of hatchlings due to flooding of seawater over the nests. Villagers believe that this could be a fall-out of the global warming phenomenon, which is also leading to increased erosion of sand dunes in Morjim by high tides.

The villagers are aware that this is only the beginning and that they will have to face bigger threats in trying to protect the olive ridley turtle. However, they take heart from the fact that they have become the leaders of the turtle conservation movement that is catching on in Goa. Galgibag beach in South Goa has started following in Morjim's footsteps since last year and the number

of hatchlings that have been released from Galgibag this year has touched 573 hatchlings from seven nests so far. A great beginning!

(This article is based on the current study that is being carried out by Ms. Roshni Kutty as part of a Directory of Community Conserved Areas in India)

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A preliminary survey of sea turtles along the coast of Maharashtra and Goa

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A preliminary survey was carried out along the coast of Goa and Maharashtra from May 13 –31, 2000. Twenty five localities in Maharashtra and nine in Goa were visited. The objective of the survey was to collect information from secondary sources such as local people, fishermen, forest officials, fisheries department, trawler owners and workers and local non government organisations. The survey commenced from the Goa coast. Most of the sites visited in each district represent the southern and northern limits of that district which gives the idea of distribution pattern of marine turtles in that district.

Status in Goa

The Forest Department has created awareness regarding the sea turtles through media and newspapers. Thus the people in Goa were aware about this group. While interviewing various people in Goa, it was noticed that they were willing to talk about all the marine fauna other than the sea turtles. In Goa, there are two main nesting sites of olive ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*): one at Morjim, North Goa and another at Galgibag, South Goa. Both these sites are protected by the forest department with the help of local people. Apart from these sites, two less populated sites at Querim and Palolem may be potential breeding sites of marine turtles and are