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SEA TURTLES

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LEATHERBACK TURTLE *DERMOCHELYS CORIACEA* WASHED ASHORE AT KIVALAM, MADRAS*

Of the five species of sea turtles occurring in the Indian seas, the leatherback turtle *Dermochelys coriacea* (Linnaeus) popularly known as 'Eluvarai amai' or 'Dhoni amai' is rare. The egg laying habits of *D. coriacea* has been described by Deraniyagala (1939). Bhaskar (1979, 1981) reported on the nesting grounds and capture of this species in Lakshadweep and Andaman Islands. The nesting of leatherback turtle along the Kerala Coast has been reported by Cameron (1923) and Jones (1959) and along the Andhra Coast near Visakhapatnam by Dutt (1979). The washing ashore of the carcass of a female *D. coriacea*, 35 km south of Madras near Kovalam fishing village is recorded here.

Description

The body of the adult is smooth skinned, without any scutes; carapace is black with seven longitudinal ridges and plastron with five longitudinal ridges. Upper jaw with a well defined cusp on each side, giving the horny beak a W-shaped appearance when viewed from front; flippers without claws and the anterior much larger and posterior broadly connected with tail by a web. The carapace is dark brown to almost black; whitish spots on neck increasing in number on the ventral and caudal areas.

This species is said to nest three to four times in a year but the peak intensity is during May and June. The eggs vary from 50 to 55 mm in diameter and weigh

from 70 to 80 gm. The period of incubation is from 50 to 70 days. The carapace length of hatchlings varies from 80 to 85 mm and weighs about 32.5 to 33.5 gm. The species is predominantly pelagic and highly migratory and found usually in the open sea.

Distribution

Western Central Atlantic, northward extending to Nova Scotia, Canada, southward to Rio de la plata, Argentina, Mediterranean, Eastern Atlantic from the British Isles to Cape of Good Hope; Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Details of specimen recorded at Kovalam

A female leatherback turtle (Plate I) was washed ashore near Kovalam, Chinglepet District, Tamil Nadu on 28th March 1982. The carcass was in an advanced state of decomposition and in almost two pieces, the anterior part of the carapace was almost disconnected from the posterior part. The seven ridges on the carapace were clear in the anterior part and the plastron was completely exposed. Head was incomplete, only the posterior portion of the head was attached to the body. The lower jaw was intact. The fore flippers were elongate while the hind flippers were damaged. In Table 1 the stranded specimen is compared with the specimens reported along the Kerala Coast.

Table 1. Details of leatherback turtle reported along Kerala and Tamil Nadu Coasts

	Off Quilon (after Cameron, 1923)	off Calicut (after Jones, 1959)	Off Madras (present record)
Reported in	1923	July 1956	March 1982
Carapace length (cm)	213.3	190.5	195
Carapace width (cm)	—	116.8	119
Plastron length (cm)	—	—	162 (incomplete)
Plastron width (cm)	—	—	102 (incomplete)
Head width (cm)	—	—	34
Length of anterior flipper (cm)	—	—	110
Length of posterior flipper (cm)	—	—	85
Weight (kg)	272.4	—	—
Sex	Female	Female	Female

*Prepared by M. Rajagopalan.



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Ventral view showing the decomposed state



Close up view of the head



Dorsal view of the same



Stranded leatherback turtle at Kovalam Beach

Leatherback turtle *Dermochelys coriacea* ashore at Kovalam, Madras.