

# To save the Olive Ridley

## A sea turtle conservation drive

BRAHMANAND SINGH

FROM the last week of December till the first week of March every year you just might come across on a late night walk on the Madras beaches a 40 kg boulder in some comic sort of tap dance. It is just a small celebration that the Olive Ridley sea turtle indulges in, after laying eggs in the sand.

Between the Besant Nagar and the VGP beaches, hundreds of Olive Ridelies come ashore to lay eggs. During the optimum nesting period between midnight and 2 a.m., each walks ponderously out of water and finds a suitable spot, often between the high tide line and the vegetation around. If all is fine, it earnestly digs a nest, about half a metre deep, and then the strenuous labour starts. Round, white, smooth, leathery and bouncy ping pong balls start coming out, within seconds of each other, sometimes two or three at once.

In the initial stage the turtles may be very timid and sensitive and may turn back if disturbed, even by a strange object or sound. But once the laying starts, even an earthquake might not interrupt a determined female till it has finished depositing the 100 to 150 eggs.

Curiously, after doing so, it closes the nest and flattens it. Then it proceeds to make a false nest, vaguely agitating the sand with the flippers while moving away. Ironically, it is this little deceiving prank that creates a V-shaped mark and makes it cruelly easy for dogs, crabs and poachers to take the eggs away.

Public awareness about the plight of this beleaguered breed of sea turtles does surface, from time to time but there is hardly anyone genuinely motivated to take proper care. It is here that the Friends of Ridley, the SSTCN (Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network), comes in — motivated and dedicated. Groups of teenagers "turtle-walk" with rucksacks and torches to spot nests, find the eggs and re-nest them safely in their small hatchery at Neelankarai. In the 2½-month peak nesting period the volunteers walk almost every night to spot and save the eggs before poachers or animals can eat, sell or destroy them. Says

Gautami, a second year undergraduate zoology student at SIET College: "If we don't spot the eggs in time, the poachers come and dig them away. They are the greatest threat, apart from environment itself, to the fast-vanishing breed of sea turtles."

In spite of the effort to preserve the Olive Ridley, placed in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, eggs are being sold in various markets. Shabbar Sheerazi, another turtle enthusiast who, in spite of having a strenuous 9 to 5 job, walks once or twice every week, points out: "It's freely done. The police watch it, but who has the time? Aren't there more 'important' things to do?"

To arrest the depredation and to create awareness, student-members formed the SSTCN in 1988. Their first two years yielded only 68 and 55 nests respectively. Last year Satish Bhaskar, the internationally acknowledged sea turtle expert, helped them find 206 nests. This year, working without Satish, who is off on a project in the Andamans, they have managed about 150. However, the management plan and survey structure Bhaskar helped them adapt have made their work scientific, and their statistical accumulations can add an important dimension to turtle study.

There are interesting aspects to turtle nesting. "In Tuticorin (near Kanyakumari)," explains Gautami, who has an enviable collection of slides of turtles, "they slaughter turtles and drink the blood, believing they can revive their health through this mythical elixir." There is a story that the Government of Tamil Nadu has even received a petition from the "Sea Turtle Blood Drinkers' Association of Tuticorin," seeking permission to continue their traditional activities in the interest of their health.

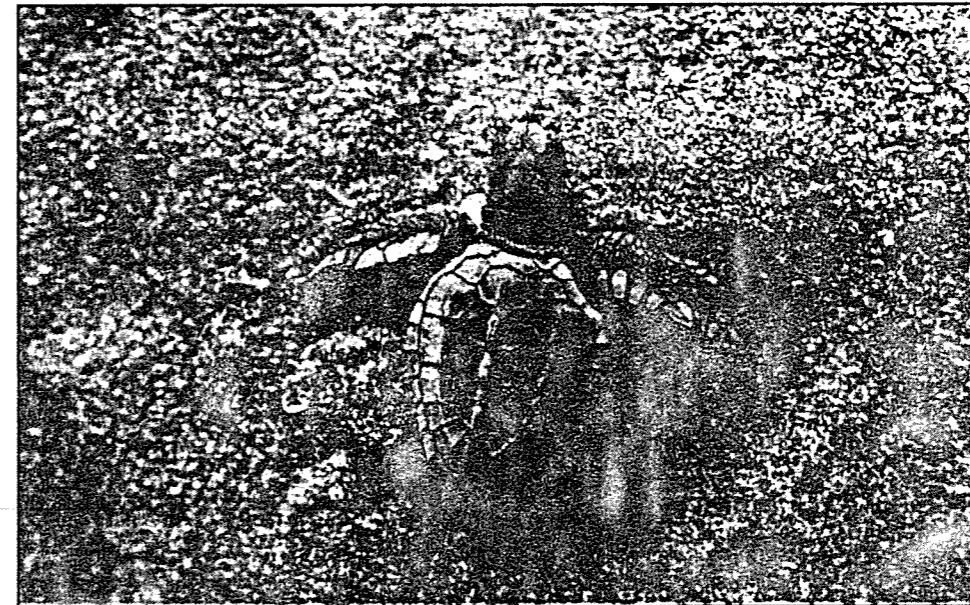
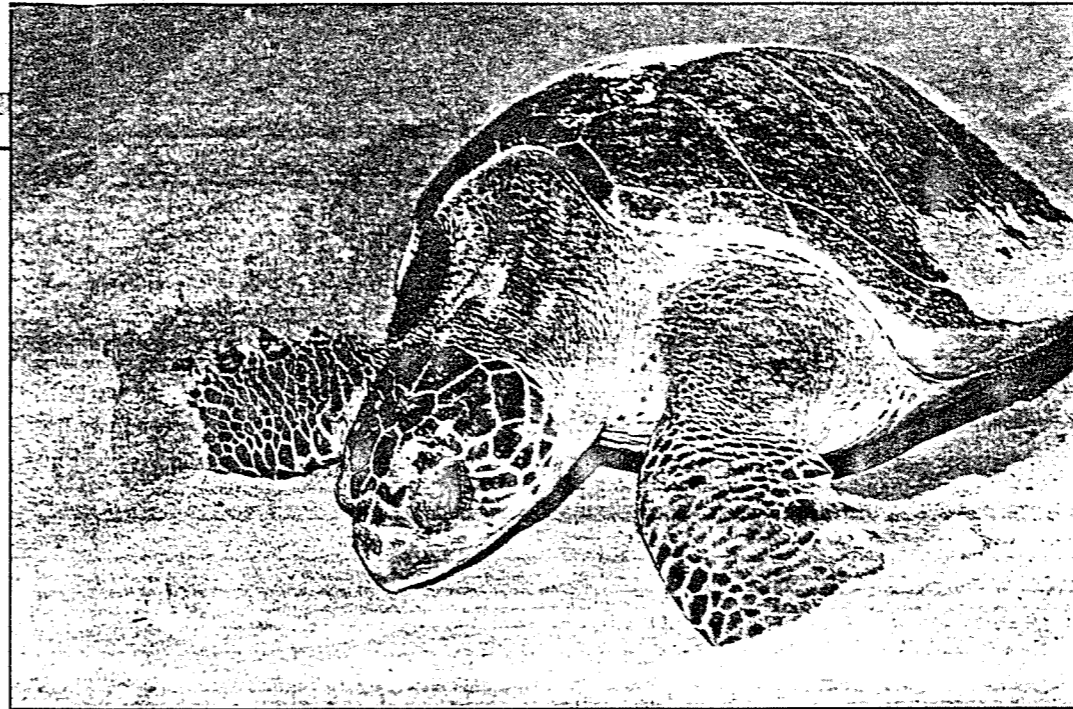
Karthikeyan, a zoology student at Loyola College, Madras, produces a slide showing a dead turtle fixed in the sand and people throwing stones on it and also garianding it.

One interesting phenomenon is the *arribada* — Spanish for arrival — of the Olive Ridelies. On the Indian coast this incredible nesting orgy takes place only in Orissa. Thousands of turtles nest on a 5-km stretch over a week in January-February and again in April.

In one of nature's frenzies, the turtles are hobbled out of the sea waves in succession — successive bands digging and destroying the nests of the previous ones. And thousands of egg shells and sticky yolk lie all around.

The turtle lays eggs in such large numbers as the survival rate is low. The Friends of Ridley, after caring for each nest in the hatchery for 45 days, has achieved a hatching percentage of over 60. Last year they released 12,454 hatchlings into the sea. However, probably not more than one in a thousand may reach adulthood.

The SSTCN survives on subscriptions and the sale of posters and stickers. It makes audio-visual presentations and lectures in schools and colleges to create awareness and concern for the plight of the turtle. Shabbar Sheerazi, Venkat, Karthikeyan, Subramaniam, Radhika and Gautami, who form the core group, carry on the work started by Chandu, Kartik and Yohan in 1988. Is the world listening? ■



(Clockwise from above) A nesting Olive Ridley; a hatchling, seaward bound; SSTCN volunteers collecting eggs from the beach to be taken to the safety of the hatchery; taking measurements of a nesting turtle... interesting aspects.

Pictures: Kartik Shankar

