

Turtle Hatcheries

Loris ?

A Review by DR. SIRI WICKREMASINGHE

AN earlier article (LORIS XVI, 1-1982) outlined the measures adopted by the W.N.P.S. to further the cause of turtle conservation in the country. Over one year has passed since the programme commenced and a review of the work done and results achieved is in order.

Kosgoda Hatchery

This hatchery continued to occupy first place in the programme. Turtle eggs were obtained throughout 1982 (except in May/June when purchasing was suspended due to lack of funds). The figures are given in Table I.

KOSGODA HATCHERY 10/12/81-14/04/83

Number of Eggs buried	....	92,103
Hatchlings released	....	41,946
Eggs Hatched & Spoilt	....	79,281
Eggs Incubating 14/04/83	....	12,822
% Hatching	....	52.9

Unfortunately, no regular and accurate speciation was performed after 04/04/82. From the observations of Mr. Similiyas Abrew, his family, the author and visitors to the hatchery, Olive Ridleys continue to be the most plentiful, followed by Green Turtles. Leather Backs and Hawksbills are relatively uncommon and Logger-heads are very rare.

Egg-laying, although maximal from November to April, continues throughout the year. The hatching rate is still comparatively low but the total figure is affected by the initial low rate. A major factor is that the severe drought that generally prevails annually from February-April which adversely affects the hatching rate.

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Bentota Hatchery

This hatchery too has continued its good work under the able guidance of Mr. Shanti Abeyratne and K. W. Karolis. The figures are given in Table 2.

BENTOTA HATCHERY 14/12/81-26/02/83

No. of Eggs buried	....	14,843
Eggs Hatched and Spoilt	....	10,662
Eggs Incubating 23/01/83	....	4,181
Hatchlings released	....	7,537
% of Hatching	....	70.7

BREAKDOWN INTO SPECIES

Olive Ridleys	....	5,620	—	74.5 per cent
Green Turtles	....	1,193	—	15.8 per cent
Hawksbill	....	356	—	4.7 per cent
Leather Back	....	293	—	3.8 per cent
Logger-head	....	75	—	1.0 per cent

Palatupane Hatchery

This hatchery continues to be in the care of Mr. Wimaladasa, the Palatupane W.N.P.S. bungalow-keeper. The figures are given below:—

TABLE 3

PALATUPANE HATCHERY

NOVEMBER 1981—NOVEMBER 1982

No of Eggs buried	....	7,150
Hatchlings released	....	4,622

TABLE 4

ALL HATCHERIES

No. of Eggs buried	....	114,096
Hatchlings released	....	54,105

Hotels Bayroo and Neptune are continuing their conservation efforts but no figures are available. Another hatchery has commenced operation at the Tangalle Bay Hotel under the guidance of Dr. Sunil Wickremasuriya.

Payment is made in general for the purchase of eggs and hatchlings released. In addition, in certain instances, retainers are paid. The computed cost is a little over Rs. 1/- per hatchling released.

Observations of Interest

The migratory habits of our turtles are unknown. Carribean and Australian green turtles and logger-heads are known to undertake long migratory voyages between nesting and feeding grounds. It may well be that availability of adequate feeding areas close off-shore, especially in the gulf of Mannar obviates such journeys for our turtles. It is believed by the Kosgoda beach folk, that a large number of turtles gather and feed around some off-shore rocks about half a mile out at sea, called Kattagala. They have also observed that there has been a large increase in the number of baby turtles (6-12 months of age) in the past 6 months, testifying, perhaps to the success of the programme.

Another observation of interest is that there had been an Arri Bada (mass nesting) of Olive Ridleys in December, 1978, immediately prior to the cyclone. The beach folk estimate that about a hundred turtles nested at the same time, some animals not even bothering to dig an egg chamber. Numerous sack-loads of eggs had been collected.

There is a strong belief among the people that the mother turtle lies in wait out at sea to devour its progeny. This folk-tale is unlikely to be true as the hatching period depends on a number of variables especially weather condition and the exact night of emergence is difficult

to predict. This of course does not preclude the possibility of an adult turtle (Hawkbills and Loggerheads mainly which are carnivorous) devouring any hatchling coming its way.

Another observation of interest is that some turtles make trial "Beachings" before actually laying. This usually take the form of a half-moon or V shaped track on the beach. Some experts believe this manoeuvre is conducted by the turtle to discover its natal shore by olfaction and it turns back if it is not the correct beach.

Comments

The Society can be justifiably proud of having released over 50,000 hatchlings in a little over one year. But the cost is high at over a Rupee per hatchling. The money has come mainly from the Hassellblad Trust, partly from the Society and private contributions. It is a matter of regret to note however that after initial enthusiasm, interest has waned somewhat among the Society members. It is vital that the initial impetus is maintained and a sustained effort is made to continue and expand the present programme.

Editor's Note

At another hatchery at Bundala, set up under the aegis of the Department of Wildlife Conservation, 7,369 eggs were buried. Of these over 5,000 hatched, giving a hatching success of approximately 71%. The breakdown of species was as follows:—

Olive Ridleys	....	2,930 eggs
Green	....	584 eggs
Leathery	....	278 eggs
Loggerhead	98 eggs
Unidentified	3,479 eggs

Source: March for Conservation
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