

Turtle Trekker: Satish Bhaskar

Rom Whitaker

In the early '70s, the Madras Snake Park became a local hang-out for young folks from nearby campuses like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), the AC College of Architecture and the Madras Christian College (MCC). Thirty years later, when I run into some of these guys in strange places (they're now mostly as paunchy and balding as I am), we trade a few stories and get into a laughing fit over 'the good old days'.

One of the characters who showed up then was a soft-spoken engineering student named Satish Bhaskar. He was a non-drinker and a non-smoker, a real ascetic compared to the rest of us. His passion was the sea and he spent more time swimming than in the IIT classrooms.

This was a time when a bunch of us—including my sister Nina, her husband Ram Menon, Zai Whitaker, Jean and Janine Delouche, Anne Joseph and Wendy Bland, to name a few—spent many nights trudging the endless beach between Madras and Kalpakam, looking for olive ridley turtle nests. (Walking back with the eggs was always a lot harder... how we dreamed of ATVs, or at least a camel cart!) We had set up India's first sea turtle hatchery (at the home of the Delouches), taking cues from sea turtle heroes like Archie Carr and Barry Hughes.

That first year (1974), we rescued 14,000 ridley eggs from poaching. We released the 9,000 that hatched and it made us all feel real good. 'This is conservation action,' we thought as we patted ourselves on the back. In later years, when we learned about temperature sex determination, we realised our approach should have been a bit more scientific. It was this bunch of people who set the ball in motion, alerting the government and the public to the plight of the Indian sea turtles. Importantly, their activities also drew international attention to the need for scientific and monetary inputs to save our turtles.



Another dedicated sea turtle worker in the mid-'70s was S Valliappan, then working at the Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI), Madras which was right across the road from the Snake Park. Not only was he on those first 'turtle walks', collecting eggs and dissuading poachers, he also took the first pictures of commercial sea turtle slaughter at the Tuticorin market—which eventually led to the forest department clamp-down. The turtle-killers of Tuticorin then started the Turtle-Blood Drinkers' Association to try to fight the ban. Luckily, they failed.

While these preventative measures were timely, what we really needed to know in those days was the status of sea turtles—which species come to Indian shores, where, when, and in what numbers. I was concentrating on crocs at the time and whenever I could get away from the Snake Park, it was to survey gharial, mugger and saltwater crocodile habitats. We really needed a full-time 'sea turtle man'.

Opportunely (for the turtles), Satish was getting disenchanted with his course at IIT and yearned to be a field man with a mission. The Snake Park had a tiny research budget, about enough to hire Satish as field officer and get him out on his first surveys. When the fledgling World Wildlife Fund (now Worldwide Fund for Nature) saw the good work he was doing for the endangered sea turtles, Satish landed his first grant. That really set him in motion.

About this time, the Madras Crocodile Bank was being born and Satish was one of its first residents. He was there to help build the place (in between the sea turtle trips), but funds were tight and sporadic and there were times when he was out of work. So what did he do? He kept in shape by filling a bag of sand, carrying it to the other end of the Croc Bank, dumping it there and starting again! And it all helped. This is the guy who, over the next few years, walked most of India's extensive coastline—over 4,000 km, looking for sea turtles, their tracks and nests!

In 1979, Satish visited the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the first time and, like so many of us, got hooked. Over the next few years, again thanks to WWF and other funds, he visited most of the islands' major sea turtle nesting beaches. A near-mythical Satish-exploit of this period is his many months sojourn, over several years, on tiny South Reef Island on the west coast of North Andaman. He was studying the hawkbill and green turtle populations there. It was tough, with no freshwater, and of course, no food. Satish would swim the half kilometre of vicious currents to Interview Island and back to collect freshwater in a jerry can. Once he ran into one of the notorious feral elephants of Interview Island, who promptly charged him. As he ran down the forest path, Satish threw down his shirt which fortunately distracted the angry pachyderm. The next day he swam back to Interview to retrieve his jerry can and found his shirt in three pieces. He posted the pieces to his wife Brenda (back in Madras) with a reassuring note!

There are people in remote parts of the islands who helped Satish and respect him greatly. Saw Bonny, a Karen and employee of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands forest department, risked his life regularly, ferrying supplies during stormy monsoon weather to South Reef Island.



Satish's recommendations for the protection of nesting beaches helped give the Andaman and Nicobar Islands forest department a solid conservation basis to resist the interests of big businesses and government departments in 'developing' beaches for tourism.

Before the Andamans, Satish had visited the Lakshadweep Islands in 1977, and realised that the uninhabited island of Suhelipara was *the* place for a green turtle study. The only problem: the main nesting period is during the monsoon and no one goes there when the sea gets that rough. A few years later, in 1982, Satish came up with a scheme to maroon himself (with WWF funding) on Suhelipara for the whole monsoon, from May to September. That way he could collect data on green sea turtle nesting for the entire period. But it also meant making elaborate preparations, like calculating the amount of food he would need. We sat with Satish and talked about things that could go wrong during this isolation—chronic toothache, appendicitis and malaria were just a few sobering thoughts. The navy did provide some signal flares and there was talk of a radio, but eventually Satish just set sail and that's the last we heard of him till September. Actually that's not true. A few months after he was dropped on Suhelipara, Brenda received an envelope from a Sri Lankan fisherman which enclosed a loving note from Satish. The fisherman had found the letter in a floating bottle! We had always speculated upon whether that would really work. Anyway, Satish had launched his message in a bottle on July 3; it was 750 km and 24 days till the bottle was picked up.

Incidentally, an emergency did arise on the deserted island—a situation that none of us could have predicted. A dead whale shark was washed up on Satish's little island and started to rot. The nauseous stench became so overpowering that our intrepid sea turtle man was forced to move to the other end of the tiny island, to a somewhat precarious, wave-lashed spit of sand.

Satish's tremendous efforts were being appreciated by sea turtle biologists worldwide. (And also by commercial organisations: he received an award and a fancy watch from Rolex for his daring conservation work.) Papers on sea turtles of this region were scarce and Satish's publications helped to fill that big gap. Satish also worked on freshwater turtles; when we received his field reports from West Bengal, he was quickly nicknamed Batagur Bhaskar (after the highly endangered river terrapin *Batagur baska* which has been eaten to near extinction in West Bengal).

In the 1980s, WWF-Indonesia contracted Satish to study the huge, commercially exploited leatherback turtle rookeries on the beaches of the Bird's Head, the westernmost peninsula of the island of New Guinea, in Irian Jaya—one of those last few remote spots on earth. The data that Satish compiled helped the WWF and the Indonesian government formulate a management plan for leatherback turtles.

At about this time, another star researcher emerged—J Vijaya. Though known mainly for her work on tortoises and freshwater turtles (she re-discovered the forest cane turtle *Geoemyda silvatica* in Kerala), this Snake Park field researcher took the shocking photos of the olive ridley harvest at Digha beach in 1980 (see Plate 6). Published in *India Today*, these pictures shook the government out of its lethargy and even West Bengal was made to toe the wildlife protection line. Vijaya died tragically when she was in her twenties.



Satish now lives in Goa with his wife Brenda (who was, incidentally, secretary at the Snake Park and Croc Bank for many years) and their three children (Nyla, Kyle and Sandhya).

Satish is the man who kicked sea turtle conservation in India into high gear. There's a strong lesson in this and an inspiring message to young naturalists who wonder 'What can I do to help?'. Satish's single-minded work for sea turtles—in his quiet, often unorthodox way—set the stage for the major conservation programmes being planned today. This is a prime example of how one person's passion for an animal and its habitat can help make the difference between survival and extinction.

Satish Bhaskar's publications

1978. Coral reefs. *Hamadryad* 3(2).
1978. Notes from Gulf of Kutch. *Hamadryad* 3(3): 9–11.
1978. Sea turtles and other marine life in Lakshadweep. *Hornbill* Apr/June.
1978. Turtle egg collection. *Tiger Paper* Vol. 14.
1979. Letters from the Andamans. *Hamadryad* 4(2).
1979. Notes from Lakshadweep. *Hamadryad* 4(1).
1979. Sea turtles in the South Andaman Islands. *Hamadryad* 4(1): 3–6.
1980. Save our coral reefs. *Compassionate Friend*.
1980. Sea turtle survey in the Andaman and Nicobars. *Hamadryad* 4(3): 2–26.
1981. Greenhorn in the Andamans. *Newsl. Nature Club of India* 6(3).
1981. *Sea turtle survey of southern Tamil Nadu*. Report to WWF–India. 5 pp.
1981. *Sea turtle survey of the Goa coast*. Report to WWF–India. 4 pp.
1981. *Sea turtle survey of the Kerala coast*. Report to WWF–India. 6 pp.
1981. *Sea turtle surveys of Great Nicobar and Little Andaman islands*. Report to WWF–India. 5 pp.
1981. *Sea turtles of Gujarat state, western India*. Report to WWF–India. 11 pp.
1981. *Survey of sea turtle nesting beaches on the west coast of Saurashtra*. Report to WWF–India. 3 pp.
1981. Travels in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands: 1979. *Hamadryad* 6(1): 2–8.
1982. (with C S Kar) Status of sea turtles in the Eastern Indian Ocean. In *Biology and conservation of sea turtles*, ed. K A Bjorndal. Washington D C: Smithsonian Institution Press. 356–372.
1982. *Sea turtle survey of northern Andhra Pradesh, India*. Report to WWF–India. 6 pp.
1982. *Sea turtles of Suheli Valiyakara Island, Lakshadweep, India*. Report to WWF–India. 4 pp.
1982. Turtle tracking in Gujarat. *Hamadryad* 7(1).
1983. (with R Whitaker) Sea turtle resources in the Andamans. In *Mariculture potential in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands: An indicative survey*. *Bull. Cent. Mar. Fish. Inst.* 34: 94–97.
1984. Locating and conserving sea turtle nesting grounds in the Andamans. In *Spirit of enterprise: The 1984 Rolex Awards*. London: Aurum Press. 190–193.
1984. *Sea turtles in North Andaman and other Andaman Islands*. Report to WWF– India. 46 pp.



1984. The distribution and status of sea turtles in India. In *Proceedings of the Workshop Sea Turtle Conservation*, ed. E G Silas. Kochi: Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute Special Publication No. 18. 21–35.
1985. Letters from the dark unknown. *Hamadryad* 10: 1&2.
1985. Satish Bhaskar writes from Irian Jaya. *Hamadryad* 10: 3.
1986. *Leatherback beaches of the Vogelkop Peninsula, Irian Jaya*. Final report to WWF-Indonesia.
1992. (with G C Rao) Present status of some endangered animals in the Nicobar Islands. *J. Andaman Sci. Assoc.* 8(2): 181–186.
1992. *Sea turtle study and survey project. Phase I (Great Nicobar Island)*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and Madras Crocodile Bank Trust.
1993. *Andaman and Nicobar sea turtle project. Phase II (South Reef Island)*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and Madras Crocodile Bank Trust.
1993. *Andaman and Nicobar sea turtle project. Phase III*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and Centre for Herpetology/Madras Crocodile Bank Trust.
1993. (with H V Andrews) Action plan for sea turtles in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India. *Marine Turtle Newsl.* (60): 23.
1993. *The status and ecology of sea turtles in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands*. Centre for Herpetology/Madras Crocodile Bank Trust. Publication No. ST 1/93.
1994. *Andaman and Nicobar sea turtle project. Phase IV*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and Centre for Herpetology/Madras Crocodile Bank Trust.
1994. *Andaman and Nicobar sea turtle project. Phase V*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and Centre for Herpetology/Madras Crocodile Bank Trust.
1994. *Andaman and Nicobar sea turtle project. Phase VI*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Environmental Team (ANET). 21 pp.
1994. The Dugong: Siren of the seas. *Sanctuary Asia* 14: 42–45.
1995. *Andaman and Nicobar sea turtle project. Phase VII*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Environmental Team (ANET).
1995. *Andaman and Nicobar sea turtle project. Phase VIII*. Report submitted to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Environmental Team (ANET).
1996. Re-nesting intervals in the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) on South Reef Island, Andaman Islands, India. *Hamadryad* 21: 19–22.
1996. Sea kraits on South Reef Island, Andaman Islands, India. *Hamadryad* 21: 27–35.