

A NOTE ON SEA TURTLES OF MADRAS

BY

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For the past four years, the Madras Snake Park Trust staff and volunteers have been collecting sea turtle eggs on the coast of Madras, incubating them at India's first sea turtle hatchery and releasing the young.

The sea turtle which nests on our coasts is the Pacific or Olive Ridleys. It is almost 1 metre in length and weighs 50 kg. The females come ashore two or three times during the egg laying season, (end December to mid March). Each time, the female lays about 100 ping pong ball sized eggs in a hole dug above the tidal line with her hind flippers. Watching her ponderous struggle up from the sea is seeing something right out of the ancient reptile era over 100 million years ago.

Sea turtles are killed throughout the world for their meat. In Tamilnadu the Green Sea Turtle is regularly slaughtered in Tuticorin Market, and the Ridleys is harvested on the Orissa and Bengal coasts. Extensive killing and egg collection has brought some sea turtles close to the danger point. Before this happens to the sea turtles off our coasts, we hope that efforts are made by the Central and State Fisheries and the Forest Departments to protect the nesting beaches and initiate studies on these fascinating and economically valuable reptiles.

Pilot farming projects would be ideal agencies for proving the commercial viability of sea turtle harvests on a carefully controlled basis (to avoid over-exploitation) on our islands like the Lakshadweeps, Andamans, those off Ramanathapuram and in the Gulf of Kutch.

The sea turtles which have been observed feeding and/or breeding on our coasts and islands are:

Common Name	Scientific Name	Feeding	Breeding	Commercial value
Olive Ridleys	<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>	Whole East Coast	Whole East Coast	Meat, leather, calipee
Green Sea turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	Andamans, S.E. Coast, Lakshadeep	Andamans, Lakashadweep, Ramanathapuram	Meat, leather, calipee
Hawksbill turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>	S.E. Coast, Lakshadweep	Lakshadweep	Shell, calipee
Leatherback	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	Andamans	Andamans	Oil
Loggerhead	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	S.E. Coast	?	

