

## THE GULF OF MANNAR ISLANDS

Between 1st and 22nd March '77 Mr Satish Bhaskar, field officer of the Madras Snake Park, joined a survey team from the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute on a visit to several islands in the Gulf of Mannar. He wished to learn about the status of dugongs and sea turtles in this area. Some extracts from his Report.

3rd March: Left for Krusadai from Mandapam Camp aboard the "Chippi". Krusadai (1 mile by half a mile) is one of the four islands in the vicinity of Pamban on Rameshwaram Island to be protected by Govt. The others are Pullivasal, Pulli and Shingle. Most of the islands in the Gulf of Mannar have live coral reefs encircling them partly or fully; the width of these coral fringes tends to be greater on the seaward than on the mainland side. Very shallow reefs consisting mainly of coral stone (coral that has been compacted into stone over the acorns) often form a barrier to the approach of sea craft of any respectable size. The Krusadai beach is narrow (10 metres), of sand and shingle. A green turtle (Chelonia mydas) carapace lay on the beach. Nesting on the island does not occur frequently - possible reasons for this may include the narrowness of the sandy beaches, the presence of the reefs, and the disturbance created by fishing launches. The only species confirmed to nest on the islands is the Olive Ridleys (Lepidochelys olivacea). The following species are known to exist in the area, but the leatherback is very rare: green, Ridley, hawksbill, loggerhead and leatherback. On the way back to Mandapam the helmsman saw a dugong, briefly.

6th March: Went to Hare Island, which is about 5 miles long and averages half a mile in width. Being a private island (a gift of the Raja of Rannad to the family of the present owner) we had to obtain prior permission for landing on it. The marine fauna of Hare Island seems to be less disturbed and exploited than that of the other islands, because fishermen are not allowed to ply their nets here. The 50 or so people who live on Hare Island carry staffs while wading, to detect quick sand. A skeleton of a whale lay on the beach and on the other end I saw a huge cycloid scale 8" in diameter. A Ridley carapace, a green carapace and a hawksbill carcass lay at different spots on the beach. While I was walking round, members of the survey team saw a dugong feeding for an hour in shallow water a mere 50 ft from the anchored "Chippi". Later we saw a Ridley swimming on the choppy sea surface.

7th March: Visited Pullivasal. There being no safe approach to this island, we anchored off Pulli and waded across to Pullivasal in 3 ft of water. Later in the day it was high tide and I got a soaking. Women were wading in the seaward reef, looking for sea-weed. The protected status of the island did not deter them. On the island, a Ridley carapace and a fresh Chelonia carcass were seen.

8th March: Visited Mulli, Valai and Talairiyer. Saw a waterspout near Mulli (a mild tornado). At Talairiyer there was a dead Ridley. On the way back to Mandapam Camp, saw two dugongs on the sea surface; they dived when our launch approached to within 50 mts of them.