

preference for their meat. I have some evidence that they are sent to markets in Calcutta, but you know how difficult it is to collect authentic data in such matters.

The fishermen here do catch and, I am afraid, even treat them with callousness. They certainly do not worship them. According to CMFRI data (Newsletter No.7, October '77 - March '78), 3000 to 4000 green turtles are captured annually in the Gulf of Mannar alone, and regularly slaughtered on Sundays in Tuticorin market.

1979

In May 1976 a leatherback which came on shore at Vizag was injured and killed due to reckless handling by people who should have known better".

*Hamadryad 4(2):*

LETTERS FROM THE ANDAMANS

3-6

Satish Bhaskar, Field Officer of the Madras Snake Park, has been in the Andamans since September '78. Apart from his periodic reports we have received several interesting letters from him:

30th November, Havelock Island - "Turtle nesting areas I've visited, since my last letter include the Betapur coast immediately north of Rangat, and English Island, but I didn't find a single track in English, nor could I visit North and South Button Islands where nesting is said to be heavy. This probably was the case in the recent past before fishermen began frequenting these shores. But on a 2 km stretch of Betapur, I dug up plenty of green, hawksbill and Ridley eggs (fresh tracks visible in some instances). What thrilled me more was finding a track 193 cms broad on this coast - almost certainly a leatherback. A huge area had also been excavated by the turtle, but oddly, no craters had been left behind - this, I think, because the turtle didn't lay - an opinion reinforced by about 5 hours of fruitless digging by me. The tracks were about 10 days old, ie made in about early November.

You may be interested to know that my boat crew saw a crocodile ( I saw the bubbles alone) in the channel between John Lawrence and Henry Lawrence Islands (ie just north of Havelock). Am I right in presuming you havn't seen crocs this far south?

I had the privilege of meeting a very brave man here. He and 4 of his crew mates were caught in a cyclone off Havelock about 3 months back. The boat engine conked out and they drifted to Burma, reaching it after 23 foodless days, unconscious but alive. What a story he has to tell! I happened to be in a queue behind him at Port Blair as he was making the last leg of his adventurous journey, purchasing a ferry ticket to Havelock. His name is Tuna (!) and he's a diver (they had been diving for Turbo and Trochus shells when overtaken by the storm). They jettisoned their entire fish catch to keep their boat afloat. 3 men unconscious and 2 remaining to bail out water. Finally they too were unconscious! What a yarn.

He's encountered sharks on numerous occasions while diving and <sup>has</sup> seen a Bengali dismembered to death off Herbertabad. No.4, but when I questioned him about sharks, the first incident he related was about a co-diver who grabbed his neck and hung on in terror when approached by a "monster" which was a dugong! This was in the channel where I saw the croc bubbles.

Recently saw the brilliant and instantaneous colour change in an 8" squid as it passed from sunlight into the shadow of our dinghy - as quickly done as neon signs do in a big city at night".

13 December, Port Blair - "At Cuthbert Bay, about the centre of Middle Andaman's eastern coast, I found another leatherback 'excavation' made, possibly, in about late September. Again, no craters were present; tracks faintly visible but didn't have time to search for eggs. I inadvertently got to within a few inches of a sea snake once again. It was in ankle deep water, probably making for nearby rocks, when I disturbed it and it made off after splashing me. I did no more shore walking that night and slept on a high rock!"

6th January, '79 - "I've just returned from Little Andaman today after 8 days there and it was unbelievable. Was I mistaken in thinking the leatherback nesting season was over? There were 82 recent leatherback excavations (which I now believe means 82 nests) including 46 sets of leatherback tracks. And two hours before New Year I saw my first nesting leatherback! She had finished egg laying and was camouflaging the nest area when I saw her. I tried barring her path to the sea by standing in front of her but she kept coming on and I had to step aside. The carapace length was 5 ft, small for a leatherback, and the tracks were 180 across. The largest track I measured was 215 cms across and the turtle had one flipper missing.

Green, Ridley and Hawksbill nests totalled only 9 in number 4 sets of tracks visible. Most of the leatherback nesting takes place on 8 km long West Bay which is about 1 1/2 days walk from the nearest human presence at the Lighthouse construction site which in itself is quite remote. I had travelled 3 1/2 days without seeing a human footprint. Coming back, I ran into an Onge tribal camp, occupants missing, and green turtle meat roasted and just begging to be eaten, which I surreptitiously did (never having eaten turtle before and being quite famished - had eaten only biscuits and vitamins for the past four days). I left two biscuit packs for the Onges to salve my conscience, actually mainly to reduce chances of stopping a spear if found out!"

27th January, Camorta (Nicobars) - The Nicobars are incredible! Let me tell you what happened at Trinkat Island. Trinkat is the tiniest of 3 islands including Nancowry and Camorta that form a cluster. I found a hawksbill nest made the previous night and after trekking the whole day, spread my polythene ground sheet on the beach. At 4.40 am I was woken by a rustling sound near my head. It was a small crocodile gaping at me through the mosquito net. I caught, weighed and released it, taking care to

inform the Forest Department of the episode. Trinkat, which lies north-south and is narrow, has mangroves on its west coast and sandy beaches on its east coast. The mangroves are known to harbour plenty crocs. On the east coast I found fresh tracks of a largish croc - each footprint was 13 cms long. Nancowry, Camorta and Katchal also have crocs, with a recent instance of a mainland being bitten on his backside while washing. Will check this out when I visit Katchal.

My enthusiasm for sleeping on sandy beaches has suffered. I'm overlooking it this time but if the crocs that wake me get any bigger I'm headed back to Madras. Have there been instances of crocs attacking a sleeping person?

At Trinkat a Nicobarese showed me a snake sheltering at low tide in 6" of sea water near mangroves. Oddly it didn't have a flattened tail I held it lightly by the tail and it wasn't bothered much at first but it soon got desperate and spun around 5 or 6 times trying to get away which it finally did. It was about 3 ft long, dirty grey and with a rounded, tapering tail. Another fast moving snake posed 4 ft away while I photographed it among coconut husks and leaf debris. It was pale yellow underneath, grey above and black spots behind the head. Length about 3 ft."

22nd February, Camorta - "Things were going well until 10th February when I injured my knee. I was miles from anywhere, almost passed out, and now, ten days later, it will not bend. You can imagine how I feel, being in the Nicobars and unable to dive, missing boats all the time to interesting islands, and my tribal permit wasting away.

I've "done" Nancowry Island and though there weren't any turtle nests I did find 8 sets of croc tracks on sandy beaches. All these were small.

On Katchal, there were 14 sets of croc tracks (the largest croc left a hind footprint 24 cms long) on sandy beaches bordered in almost every case by brackish lagoons. I got to see two small crocs on land in daylight and one in a pool by torchlight at night. This croc, hind footprint length 16 cms and blind in one eye lived in quite a bushy nullah. Hoping to see it one night as it crossed over to the sea I hid nearby but unfortunately slept off and it passed within metres of me.

Also at Katchal I saw 3 Nicobar monkeys, 3 leatherback nests, 3 green turtle nests, 11 Ridley nests and about 10 tracks made by sea snakes of at least two species, one a sidewinder. I didn't get time to visit the bay cave you mentioned - I'm not even certain that this colony has survived because no one in the village appeared to know about it. Also didn't get time to track down the survivor of a recent croc attack, but did meet a Nicobarese who had been gored by a wild boar and brought unconscious to hospital

If I had come to the Nicobars just a few months earlier than I did I would have seen a party of 4 whales which frequently swam around in the channel separating Nancowry from Camorta. Each was said to be 40-50 ft long and since they had hung about the area for 3-4 months, they were a familiar sight to all who lived here. What a sight they'd have presented underwater through masks! They appear to have left the area when one of them died and was washed not quite ashore. Many Nicobarese stripped off hunks of meat and fat and others are said to have taken the teeth as curios (may be the animals were sperm whales because I doubt whether any other species of whales above 40ft in length have teeth).

#### OBSERVATIONS ON A NESTING MUGGER AT THE MADRAS SNAKE PARK

Construction  
15/3/78

Construction  
5/4/78

On 21 March, '78, a female C. palustris in the breeding pit laid her first nest of 12 eggs. The nest was shaded, a bucket of water poured over it every Saturday and the covering earth twice removed, eggs examined and re-covered with earth/leaf mixture for porosity (the laterite soil being particularly dry we think artificial dampening is necessary). Daily temperature readings were made. On 26-3-'78 she laid another nest in the south corner (6 eggs) and actively defended this site, apparently uninterested in the first nest. The second nest was shaded after 20 days. For the next month the female only visited the second site and was not observed at the first.

At 1 am on 22/5/78 Raju, the night watchman, heard the calling of hatchlings and in full moonlight saw the female scratching earth from the first nest site with her front feet. Now and again she pushed her head into the nest hole and dug with her nose very actively. After 10 minutes 6 hatchlings were around her climbing out of the hole. The female grunted and the hatchlings responded. As she moved off toward the main pond, the 6 stayed very close to her sides and proceeded to the water. During this 6 m walk the female called 3 more times and the young replied. After 15 minutes 5 more young came from the nest and went into the small pond near the nest site. The babies called sporadically all night. Raju observed them till 5 am.

At 9 am the female chased out the sweeper and came to the small pond. we saw her push hatchlings out onto palm leaves at the pool edge repeatedly with her snout. I picked up a baby, which vocalized and the female charged from across the enclosure and bit the tree I stood behind. The male swam to where the young were grouped and the female returned to the small pond. At 9.50 Vijaya, a volunteer saw the female pick up a hatchling and carry it to the big pond in her mouth. She shook it out of her jaws where the other hatchlings were grouped. At 10.10 am we watched the female go to the nest (in response to a call?) and start digging with both front feet and sometimes hind feet, pushing earth away and head bent into the nest hole. She moved around the hole clockwise, now and then dipping her nose in and biting clods of earth etc.