

Massacre At Digha



Turtles trapped at Digha: the law violated

IN MEXICO, they call it "arribada", a word coined to describe the peculiar massing characteristic of Ridley's sea turtles, a species found mainly in the Indian Ocean. Every year, thousands of the flippered mammals would converge on a particular beach and mate en masse off-shore. Then, while the males wallowed in the shallow waters, the female sea turtles would head for the beach, dig holes in the sand, and lay their golf ball-sized eggs. The process passed off as a tourist attraction till Mexican fishermen discovered the commercial value of the high-protein eggs and the turtle flesh. When the discovery was made, an estimated 40,000 turtles visited the beach each season. Today, 10 years later, they number a mere 3,000, adding to the lengthening list of endangered species.

The same depressing scenario is being played out in Indian shores, specifically in the tourist watering hole of Digha

beach in West Bengal and the protected area of Gahirmatha at the mouth of the Mahanadi in Orissa. Every year, thousands of the animals are being systematically slaughtered for their flesh and their eggs dug up and sold to the insatiable Calcutta market where both are in high demand for their nutritional value. What is infinitely worse is the fact that

the turtles are a protected species under Schedule I of the Wildlife Act of 1972 (no commercial usage permitted) and the brutal manner in which the slaughter is being carried out unchecked. Last January on Digha beach alone, two days catch netted over 500 sea turtles while in Gahirmatha over 100,000 eggs were harvested by local "contractors" for the Calcutta market.

The commercial value and the fact that turtles are relatively simple to catch during the mating season (January to March) has currently attracted hordes of fishermen to the beaches of Bengal and Orissa, where each season's catch is growing alarmingly. The fishermen merely wait for the turtles to start copulating off-shore, when they are defenceless. They do not even require nets, they just flip the animals onto their boats where the

The turtles are loaded onto waiting carts: alarmingly big catches



PHOTOS BY VIJAYA

flippers are wired together to prevent the turtles from wriggling back into the sea. In any case, once a turtle is put on its back on the beach, it is virtually impossible for them to crawl back into the sea.

Inhuman Slaughter: The female turtles, tragically, are bloated with eggs when they are caught. Once the catch is over, the fishermen lay them out in helpless rows while professional "gutters" go down the line literally ripping out the flesh—while the animals are still alive. In some cases, live turtles are loaded onto waiting carts and rushed to the nearest railhead for shipment to Calcutta. Says J. Vijaya, a conservationist who witnessed the slaughter for two consecutive days: "It is not just the illegality of the process that is repugnant but the inhuman manner in which the turtles are killed. With thousands being slaughtered every day, there is no way that the state governments cannot be aware of what is going on. But they are just not bothered."

There was a time when the Orissa Government allowed contractors to sell one million turtle eggs to Calcutta per season in return for a royalty, but that has been stopped with the indiscriminate killing having reached immeasurable heights. Most conservationists feel that if the Government is



A fisherman slits open a turtle: high nutritional value

indifferent or even helpless to stop the mass slaughter it can at least ensure that logical, sustained usage of sea turtles for protein is carried out without the kind of inhuman slaughter that is presently taking place. This can only be done if proper studies on the breeding, biology and population dynamics of the Ridelys are undertaken. In fact, such studies have already been carried out in

other countries and it would be fairly easy to collate available material. With the basic knowledge, turtle farms can be set up and a regular programme chalked out. As one conservationist puts it; "With an efficient, logical programme for the Ridelys, the Bengalis can eat turtles forever. If the present slaughter continues, they have less than a decade to enjoy them." —DILIP BOBB

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