

19-20

Sea turtles in Sri Lanka

I have been following sea turtle developments in Sri Lanka with interest over the past few years. During May I was able to spend two weeks looking at nesting beaches in the south, between Colombo and Hambantota. Dharmin Samarajiva and myself covered some 210 kms travelling by motor cycle and bus, stopping at 'good' beaches to talk to local fishermen and others. In my book "good" meant a wide stretch with smooth slopes irrespective of the human element.

The overall situation is not too cheering. Although the five species that use these beaches- greens, olive ridleys, hawksbills, loggerheads and leatherbacks- are protected, and there are frequent police arrests and fines, local people continue to plunder the eggs. Sea erosion and heavy tourism development reduce nesting areas yearly. Nesting turtles are caught and sold; many drown in trawl nets.

At Matara although the beach is eminently suitable for nesting, local people reported that numbers of females coming ashore have dropped drastically in the last few years. Veteran fishermen attributed this decline to the extensive use of ray and squid nets. Highway lights bordering the open beach also seem to discourage females from coming ashore. Near Bentota for instance on several occasions we saw greens coming out of the sea, ascend the shore for a few feet and then turn back without laying, apparently because of the bright lights. At Matara we also found a freshly stripped ridley shell and the fore and hind flippers of a hawksbill; one fisherman reported that as many as 16 turtles- mostly greens- were caught in a single large net.

Sea turtle meat- from all five species- sells at about Rs. 5 per pound (20 SL Rupees= 1 \$US) and the main centres on the southern coast seem to be Alutgama, Dodanduwa, Boosa, Ratugama, Galle, Mirissa, Matara and Tangalla. The price of eggs varies from between 25 and 50 cents for those of greens, ridleys, loggerheads and hawksbills; leatherback eggs fetch a rupee and more. Hawksbill laminae is extracted in some places by oiling the carapace and warming the animal over a fire. After removal the turtle is reportedly released into the sea.

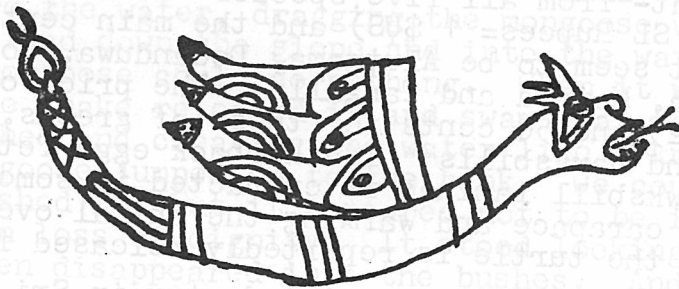
Tourism is becoming an important industry in Sri Lanka and a government-appointed Committee has recently compiled a list of places on the coastal belt where further tourism development is permissible. Although it is gratifying that due consideration has been given to preserving marine, mangrove and other ecosystems, no importance is given to protecting turtle nesting grounds. Included in the list of doomed beaches are many that are important nesting grounds of the 5 species.

One such area is the approximately 5 km stretch between Indurawa and Ahungalla where all five species are known to nest in large numbers. We spent a few nights here and saw 12 greens during one night. Others reported seeing 18 females of four species including the leatherback in a single night. And three years ago, 500 turtles came ashore in one night.

It is hoped that conservationists in Sri Lanka will make a determined protest against this beach being converted into a tourist resource because that would be the end of the nesting activity. The wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka has a hatchery at Kosgoda, between Indurawa and Ahungalla. This year some 12,000 eggs were collected. These efforts will be in vain however if further development is permitted; already considerable land has been earmarked for resorts and hotels. Fences around these plots hinder turtles from coming ashore as we saw on several occasions.

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