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TURTLE SURVEY IN SOUTHERN SRI LANKA

During late July and in August we were on a visit to the island of Sri Lanka;

Previously Rom and Zai Whitaker visited here on a mugger survey (Whitaker and Whitaker 1977) and later S. Dattatri conducted a sea turtle survey along the island's coastline (Dattatri, 1982).

In the present herpetological survey we accompanied Mr. Childers Jayawardene, assistant director of Wildlife in charge and Yala National Park, which is on the south eastern corner of the island. The area surveyed was in Yala Block I, where we covered some 13 plus km of beach to count the number of predated sea turtle nests in the past one month between late June and early August.

Name of beach at Yala Block I	Length of beach	* No. of predated nests	
		L	S
1. Mahaseelava	2 km	17	19
2. Debragasvala	--	9	10
3. Buttawa	3 km	4	-
4. Pattanangala	3 km	15	3
5. Gonlabba	2 1/2 km	9	3
6. Uraniya	3 km	11	5
	13 plus km	65	45

\* 'L' is for nests with large eggs of Dermochelys coriacea and 'S' is for smaller eggs of Chelonia mydas.

approximate diameter of the large eggs ('L') (shells filled with sand) measured (1) 51 mm X 43 mm (2) 52 mm X 45 mm (3) 46 mm and the smaller eggs measured (1) 40 mm and (2) 34 mm in diameter.

According to Mr. Jayawardene, leatherbacks (Dermochelys coriacea) Greens (Chelonia mydas) and possibly hawksbills (Eretmochelys imbricata) nest during this period (May/August). Ridley's nest at Yala in November-February months, according to Mr. Jayawardene there was a case of a loggerhead (Caretta caretta) nesting at Yala in December of 1982.

Wild boar (Sus scrofa) and to a lesser extent (Canis aureus) are the main predators of sea turtle nests. Tracks showed that a single boar walking the beach in the early mornings gorges nearly all the turtle nests laid on the previous night. Common monitor (Varanus bengalensis) tracks were seen on the beach on two occasions though not near the nesting area.

Earlier, on the 19th July on a walk along the beach at Kosgoda some 68 kms south of Colombo, we saw a green turtle ascend the beach twice only to return without nesting. The Kosgoda beach is about 1/2 km long and has been marked for use by the expanding tourist hotel industry. Many private guest houses and motels already dot the coast. Innumerable lights are kept on throughout the night which no doubt already interfere with turtle breeding. Later, on the night of 24th July we found track of a leatherback (Dermochelys coriacea) which must have nested a little before we arrived there.

#### Tortoises and freshwater turtles:-

Star tortoises (Geochelone elegans) are very common at Yala Park, which seems an ideal place for the study of these reptiles. Three mature tortoises (1:2) and a juvenile were seen during a five day stay there. They were collected on the way side while touring the park daily by vehicle. Once a mature male G. elegans shell was found.

The humps on the different scutes of the shell normally characteristic of Sri Lankan and Rameswaram (Smith, 1931) Geochelone elegans was not very evident in the Yala specimens. In specimens from Wilpattu park on the northwestern corner of the island, specimens at the Colombo Zoo and from a collection of 19 shells seized by the wildlife authorities at a shop in Colombo (said to have been collected at negombo 20 kms south of Colombo few shells with humps on them seen. Both males and females seem to have humped shells but it is more prominent in males.

Star tortoises are locally called as 'chhara' or 'nevara-ibba' referring to the high domed shell which is associated with the buddhist stupas. On the western coast between negombo and Matare where the tortoises can be obtained in sackfuls they are called 'vetakaya (pandanus) ibba', 'Ibba, which is literally 'tortoise' or 'turtle', also means padlock.

It is generally believed that the star tortoise is highly poisonous. This might be one of the reasons why they are still common in Sri Lanka. However, the tourist trade takes a large toll because the shells are sold as curios in Colombo. Recently the wildlife authorities seized a collection of 19 shells of various sizes from 43 mm to 195 mm carapace length. A 76 mm shell was valued at 15 Sri Lankan rupees and a 155 mm one at SL Rs 40.

Melanochelys trijuga thermalis, the Sri Lanka pond terrapin is reportedly common over most of the island. One turtle was found on the sea coast at Kosgoda. Melanochelys trijuga parkeri, the other subspecies reported from Sri Lanka was not seen in the wild. Deraniyagala (1939) records them from the north west and north central provinces.

We were told that the moat around Kandy Palace housed large numbers of these turtles even as late as the 1960s. Melanochelys and the flap-shell turtle Lissemys punctata flesh are thought to be good for strength. Eating the flesh is said to make ones muscles so hard that a hypodermic needle will bend when injected.

In the north central province the star tortoises are said to have become such pests in the beans and pea fields that they are routinely collected in the mornings in organised hunts and buried underground to kill them.

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with

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#### References:

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