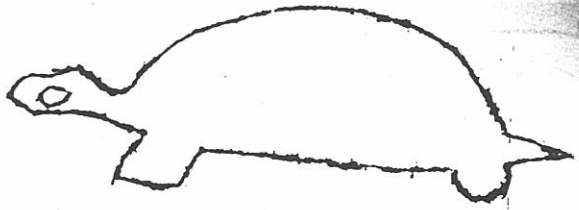


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TURTLE SURVEY UPDATE (January to April 1983)

In the last issue of Hamadryad (January '83) J. Vijaya reported on the initial survey trips taken October through December to Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Since this report our survey team (Moll, Vijaya and Satish Bhaskar) have visited Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar. Brief accounts of these trips follow.

Madhya Pradesh- Uttar Pradesh (Chambal River) survey: On our first trip to the Chambal River (January 15-31), we arrived at the end of the Kachuga tentoria nesting season and the beaches were strewn with egg shells from predated nests as well as shells of the turtles themselves which are apparently also subject to considerable predation. K.tentoria were seen basking in large numbers along with a few Lissemys punctata and Kachuga dhongoka but large turtles of other species were conspicuously absent (possibly because of the cool weather).

In addition to the turtles, we were treated to a vast array of Chambal wildlife which abounds within the confines of the Gharial Sanctuary. Besides the gharial themselves, we saw flocks of flamingos, black and white ibis, sarus cranes, bar-headed geese, spotted ducks and brahminy natkas. Particularly exciting was the occasional appearance of river dolphins and otters

After spending a week with the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department (our host) we moved across the state line to visit with the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department at Etawah. Here they had just confiscated an illegal shipment of turtles destined for the Calcutta market. The shipment included 29 Trionyx gangeticus, 3 Chitra indica and 180 Lissemys punctata. Some of this group were in too bad a condition to save but we hired a truck and hauled them to Pinahat where we released them into the Chambal (their presumed origin). Hopefully the majority survived.

Before leaving Etawah, we were privileged to watch a demonstration of a turtle catching technique by Kanjar tribals. Using long bamboo poles with iron spikes at one end, they waded into the Yamuna river probing the bottom. In two hours, they came up with a large number of Kachuga tentoria, one juvenile Kachuga dhongoka, a Lissemys and one juvenile Trionyx gangeticus.

Our most interesting find of this survey period was a Kachuga kachuga male. This has to be one of the gaudiest turtles extant. The turtle's head is blue-black with a bright red patch on top which joins with bright red stripes running the length of the neck. Needless to say we exposed considerable film in this animal's honour.

Our second trip to this region- March 29 to April 14, was made to survey nesting activity of the larger Kachugas (dhongoka and kachuga) and to initiate a hatchery for these species at the Deori, M.P headquarters of the National Chambal Sanctuary. Considerable nesting activity was taking place during our visit and while many nests were predated, several were found intact.

Four clutches (ca 100 eggs) were removed to Deori to officially initiate India's first state sponsored freshwater turtle hatchery. It is hoped this program will be expanded and become a regular part of the conservation activities conducted at the National Chambal Sanctuary.

Large Kachugas and Trionyx gangeticus were commonly seen basking along with the kachuga tentoria on this trip. A very interesting side trip was made to Bateshwar, U.P (City of 101 temples). An optimum site to observe turtles here is at the Jain-Hindu M₃deo temple on the banks of the Yamuna. At this site bodies are placed in the river and offerings of dough balls are often provided to the local turtles. Standing on the bank steps of the temple, one can see a couple dozen turtle heads at any one time. The species represented are Kachuga kachuga, K. dhongoka, K. tentoria, Lissemys punctata and Trionyx gangeticus.

Orissa Survey: In Orissa we departed from our freshwater turtle survey briefly to observe the Orissa government's sea turtle conservation program for the olive ridleys that nest along the Gahirmatha coast. Our arrival in Chandbali, Orissa was just too late to witness a mass nesting of almost 200,000 Ridleys. However, we did arrive just in time to participate with the Orissa Forest Department in releasing some 186 ridleys that they had confiscated from poachers in a large roundup operation. Using a navy cruiser, they have confiscated 10 country boats, 3 mechanized boats, and 66 poachers along with turtles. Approximately 30 turtles died before they could be released but 156 were returned to the brackish Baitarani River at Chandbali.

At Gahirmatha we were shown around by Mr. Chandra Sekar Kar who has been studying the ridley population under Forest Department sponsorship. Kar pointed out that the beach at Gahirmatha is well patrolled by home guards- 15 men as well as 25 Forest Department personnel. The most serious problem is in the sea where besides the poaching a serious fishing problem also exists. Turtles are continually being caught and drowned in fishing nets and during our brief visit around 3000 carcasses littered the 10 km stretch of beach.

For the remainder of our stay in Orissa we joined forces with Mr. S. Biswas of the Zoological Survey of India. Bhaskar, Biswas and I surveyed turtle usage on the Mahanadi at Cuttack, Naraj and Tikerpada, while Vijaya went to the north to check on sea turtle exploitation at Digha, West Bengal. She found that the trade was now done more undercover but seemed to be flourishing as well as ever.

Our final stop was at Puri to see if we could locate a turtle temple where Annandale early in the century reported a large captive population of Trionyx gangeticus. We located the probable temple but were told that the Trionyx had died out some years previously. We only saw a couple of small Kachuga tentoria in the pond. Interestingly the faithful can still be seen visiting the site and throwing in a handful of puffed rice for the turtles. After waiting expectantly a few minutes for the large Trionyx that no longer comes they depart.

Bihar Survey: Our first Bihar trip (March 3-18) was rather unproductive. A search of the Chaibassa region to obtain information on the status of Melanochelys tricarinata was unfruitful. We obtained a couple of shells of Geochelone elongata but no evidence of our target species. We did get some information on the exploitation of turtles on the Ganges between Khalgon and Rajmahal where based on shells collected, Kachuga dhongoka is being heavily exploited for food. Over all we hope our next trip to Northern Bihar in May will be more productive.

A final note of significance concerns a short survey of the Cauvery River drainage particularly the Moyar River and Amravathi Dam near the Tamil Nadu/Karnataka border. In response to reports of a large previously unreported Trionyx in these waters, we financed a survey of the area by Mr. Mark Davidar, Manager of the Madras Snake Park. Mark has fished this area frequently and thus had good familiarity with the region. Although he was unable to procure a live specimen he did get several shells which are tentatively identifiable as Trionyx leithi. He also came up with some impressively large Lissemys.

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AN IDLE BOAST?

With reference to our bombastic proclamation about Heosemys silvatica (Hamadryad 7:No.3), we plead guilty of ignorance. "After a period of 67 years", we held forth, "the forest cane turtle has been found during a recent survey in the Kerala forests by the Madras Snake Park." But in a recent letter, Michael A. Ewert of the Indiana University writes, "Two specimens of what I believe to be Heosemys silvatica seem to have escaped general notice. The first of these was in possession of a private dealer who recognized it as unique and preserved it when it died around 1970. In 1975 Dr. John Legler purchased the specimen, and it now resides in the University of Utah (UU) collection. Before 1973 I thought that this specimen was Geomyda tricarinata but I found a second, very similar specimen in the Florida State Museum (UF) collection labelled Heosemys silvatica, Calicut Hills, Kerala State, India."