

On the Turtle Trail

Turtle walks are not all a honeymoon. But they are stimulating experiences for a nature lover. The students who spend the night turtle walking on the beach work, have fun and learn.

November through February night falls abruptly, like a blanket, in the tropics. And Madras sleeps early. When the city slumbers, a group of students walk its deserted shores to wait for the Oliver Ridleys.

It is a quiet night. Even the sea rolls softly, gently and ceaselessly laving the shore. The sands blanch and the surf glistens in starlight. Nobody uses a torch. In the distance, lights from the harbour twinkle and on the far right flash the garish neons from Golden Beach. The lighthouse flicks an impatient beam over sea and sand. The turtle watchers wait. It is a lucky night. Parting the hoary foam comes an awkward dark shape. In the darkness, it seems larger than life. It pauses for a minute at the waterfront, heaving a laboured breath. There is excitement among the watchers. It is a sea turtle. Is it an Oliver Ridley? Or is it that rare visitor, the Leatherback?

The turtle watchers go as close as they dare. They know well that the female Oliver Ridley is a shy lady. Human beings startle her. Flashlights confound her. The watchers find it to be a turtle, greyish in colour, a meter from head to tail. It is a female Ridley. And she has come ashore with a purpose — to unload her precious burden of a hundred odd eggs.

She begins her laborious crawl above the high water mark, leaving a smooth track with comma shaped marks made by her flippers. This, in conservation terminology, is an 'up-track'. It is a straight diagonal from her point of entry from the sea. The Ridley suddenly decides to nest. The turtle watchers go no closer. There is breathless excitement in the camp. Even the smallest noise makes the turtle wary. When she has dug deep enough she begins laying eggs. When she has finished she covers the nest with sand. She moves up a little and

deviously shovels sand with her strong flippers all around, as a decoy. Then she crawls back, in a straight but diagonal line (the 'downtrack') to the sea. Now the uptrack and downtrack are like the arms of an angle, at the apex of which is the nest.



Abruptly, two figures come out of the darkness and yell, "Yaaruba adhu?" The hoarse stentorian tones grate the quiet of the night.

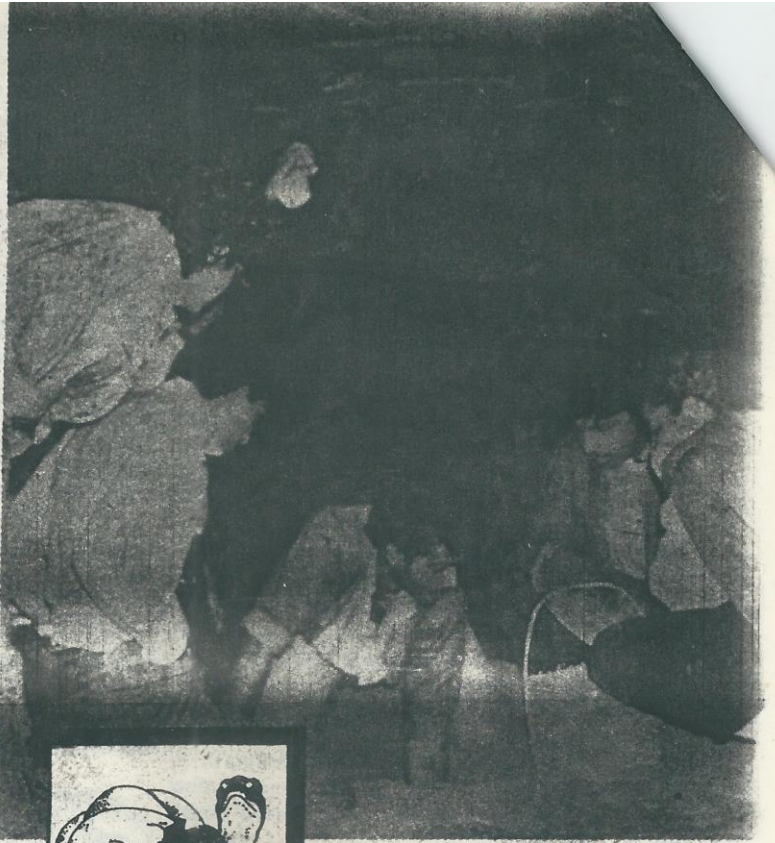
When the turtle is safely back in the sea, the turtle watchers go up to the nest, chasing off prowling dogs who are lured by the smell and are eager for a sumptuous dinner of turtle eggs. To the students it is like looking for buried treasure. They dig carefully and lay bare the nest. And there it is, a clutch of 130 eggs still warm and glistening with fresh mucus. A soft cloth bag is brought out and the eggs are, with least possible jolting, piled into it. Each egg is the size of a ping pong ball. The shell is soft and shows a surprising degree of flexibility. You can feel the life sap of the baby turtle moving within. When the last egg is in

the bag, the turtle watchers cover the hole and move on.

The turtle watchers look like a select band of beach bums. They wear scruffy shirts and trousers rolled up to the calves. Some have a pair of not too handsome keds slung around their necks. Each carries a well worn cloth bag. Few of them know each other well. There are also many new comers in the gang. Yet under the expanse of the night sky and by the vast stretches of land and sea, a strange companionship is born. Everybody shares a commitment or at least a sympathy for a cause. There is excitement in discovery and a sense of adventure in the anticipation of the unknown.

At the head of the group is a lean, jean and jacket clad figure with a rucksack — Tito Chandy. Between November and March the beach becomes Tito's nocturnal habitat. He knows it like the back of his hand. Almost every night he is on the beach, looking for eggs, beating poachers to them, and watching for turtles. His rucksack has a strange assortment of things. It has a Bible, for Tito to read by starlight when work for the night is over and it is not yet bed time. "Now I can make do with four hours of sleep a night," says Tito. There is a thermometer to measure temperature inside and outside the nest; an inch-tape to take the dimensions of the nest, cloth bags, a stick, a bedsheet, notemaking stationery, a flashlight and cigarettes. Tito has the sight of a lynx. Where others see the sand scooped in a million confused foot prints, Tito can detect a turtle track.

When the smooth track with flipper marks is spied, the corresponding downtrack is traced. At their meeting point the turtle walkers begin scooping the sand, looking for eggs. Sometimes there are no clear uptracks or downtracks. The turtle, befuddled by lights, meanders a bit or decides not



walkers: commitment and conservation



bearings. Both the mother and baby turtles are guided back to their watery home by the starlight and moonbeams over sea. But now the street lights on land send powerful beams too, and the turtles move towards land, instead of the sea, and court death. Which is why the Ridleys are listed as an endangered species (Schedule I of Indian Wildlife Act).

The turtles take a break. It is a little past the zero hour, time when yesterday and tomorrow meet. Biscuits and water are passed around. Alcohol is a no-no on the walks. When the walkers congregate at the Besant Nagar Bus Terminus (at 9.30 pm), Tito gets a written statement from participants on 'the Ridley Trail', that they do not have liquor on their person, and that they will behave. "I don't want any hanky panky behaviour on the walks," he says. Any unpleasantness from male or female walkers excommunicates them. It's a no-deal for people looking for a "little bit of fun" of the wrong kind.

The young turtles are already nodding. Others stare, proud of their little or less knowledge of astronomy. After the brief respite the walkers head towards the hatchery on the beach at Neelamangali. Arif uses his camera flash and flashes a code towards Neelamangali. "Two walkers

along the Madras beach. Dogs, the odd jackal, and poachers scrounge for eggs. In the sea, launches and trawlers make life hazardous for the turtles. The reptile swims near the surface, coming up for air occasionally. The launches rip off its heads or flippers. If turtles survive all these onslaughts, and the eggs hatch and the little ones do wriggle out of the sand pits, there are predators waiting for them. Birds of prey and dogs have a weakness for these tiny (size of a human palm) creatures. Though the phenomenon is still under study, light dispersed over the sea in some way influences the turtles,

The night is full of surprises. Scrawled on the firm, smooth beach sand, washed by the tide are messages. "Means, I love you" says one

nest. "Sometimes all we get are wing shoulders," says one turtle enthusiast, digging eagerly nevertheless. Another turtle walker who is swathed in warm clothes and cap, opens torch back behind his ear, unspools his kit. It comes a tripod, camera and flash. If a wildlife enthusiast from abroad, photographs the nest, eggs and whenever possible — turtles. The air is nippy and tangy with sea breeze. The tide is receding, leaving the shoreline warm, wet and bare. A dog wags in the fishing village. A abruptly of the darkness come two hooded gulls and yell "Yaaraba abba". The gulls stare stentorian tones grate the quiet the night. "Aamai naravichi" (turtle search) "calls back Tito. "Oh!" utter the figures, melting into the darkness as suddenly as they appeared. Somnambulant fishermen perhaps. Fishermen know of turtle walkers, activities and never interfere. At these are poachers who try to steal ahead and foot the other nests. They just plunge a stick into the possible nesting area. When the stick comes up with a yellow goo, they now they have hit a clutch," explains a Ph.D student and a committed turtle. The eggs are sold for a paise each, a fraction of the price of hen's eggs. Poaching is one of the reasons for the dwindling of the Ridley population

are covering the stretch from Kovalam to Neelangarai," he says. "I want to let them know we are here." Another friend, known to every one as Boom-boom, is also expected to join them midway.

They move on, quieter but happier. A faint murmur of running water becomes audible. Everyone stops in surprise. In their path, just ahead, snakes a dark poisonous rivulet from shore to sea. "Yuk! this smells like a carcass," exclaims a walker. "Effluents from a tannery," says Arif, coldly. "Bastards. They let it out quietly at night." He quickly unpacks his equipment and takes a few shots of the pollutants and the tannery.

The walkers leap across the rancid black waters, holding on to each other. They trek on, speaking in indignant whispers about vandals who screw up the environment. But this night is full of surprises. Scrawled on the firm, smooth beach sand, washed by the tide is the inscription, 'Chandy, I was here!' The group goes into splits. "That must be Boom-boom's message," says a walker. Further on, there are more messages. But of a different kind. One says in Tamil, "Meena, I love you." Some forlorn lover has mourned of unrequited love here. Crab hunters pass by with a dozen crabs in a paper bag, salivating in anticipation of the day's lunch.

At 3 in the morning the hatchery is sighted. It is a little hut with a small fenced enclosure on the side. For Tito who started the Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network, it is a dream come true. He and friends like Arif pitched in what they had, pooled a few thousands and put up a hut and enclosure to form the hatchery. Tito pushes aside the tin door of the hut and peers in. Huddling inside by a chimney lamp is Ramachandran. He is a local fisherman, who cannot go to sea any longer. He now serves as a full-time watchman. He unlocks the hatchery's wicket gate and a couple of turtlers enter the enclosure. There are 62 little sand pits with a little pennant beside each giving data about the eggs within. Fresh pits are dug and all eggs from one clutch are buried together. "We try to simulate natural conditions as far as possible, so that nature's energy budget is not used up," says Tito. On this walk three clutches were discovered.

"Okay guys! Let's crash...," says somebody. Sheets, blankets, cushions, are brought out with alacrity. The girls curl up inside the hut and boys stretch outside.

Two hours fly past. Already bird calls and distant voices of fishermen can be heard. The turtlers stir sleepily, unwillingly. Arif is already at work from behind the tripod, studying fishermen putting out to sea. The sun rises late, after the sky has lightened. It rises as a pale yellow orb and sends weak ribs of light over the waters. The sea is a zillion spangles of gold.

The turtlers are up now. Their clothes are rumpled and there is sand in their hair. They look around a little sheepishly. Everything seems different in daylight. Faces, clothes, moods and relationships. The newcomers band together, suddenly a little shy. It is time to go home.

Past the plush beach homes is the Mahabalipuram Road. The turtlers



A chain is as strong as its weakest link. The more number of species threatened by extinction, the more shaky the foundation of human survival itself.

stop for a hot *chai* at a tea *kadai*. Then they catch the first rutputty Pallavan home.

Turtle walking is not new to Madras. Conservation groups have been working under the auspices of the forest department for some years. Now the forest department has diverted its attention to other projects. Tito and friends continue the conservation work and would like more students to involve themselves in it. Conservation is no fun time activity, though it also can be great fun. The students involved are obsessed by its seriousness. Tito lives on the beach for weeks, guarding the precious nests. Turtle walks, too, are not all a honeymoon. But they are stimulating experiences, and to a nature walker — fulfilling. A variety of marine life is

encountered on these walks. Some walkers collect shells, starfish and cuttle fish bones. There is a mystery about the night and the empty beach and something amusing or diverting is bound to happen everytime.

Madras who put in their ten hours of sleep every night faithfully with not so much as a window open might wonder why their youth should ferret out turtle eggs in the dead of night, battling sleep and braving the cold. Especially since the turtles themselves do not have enough mother instincts to check up on their eggs. (The Oliver Ridleys come twice or thrice a season to nest but they haven't been observed coming ashore to look for their old nests or eggs.)

Conservation is important because these mute reptiles have not been studied fully yet. For instance, we still do not know what the sex determinant factor is in turtles. Apparently it is not decided by the chromosomes as it is in human beings. Is it perhaps something to do with the temperature levels during incubation then? Nobody is sure.

These reptiles are older than man in the calendar of evolution. How have they survived these million years? Man has to learn survival skills from the world around him and the study of each species adds to his repository.

Each species is a part of an intricate food chain that balances life in the biosphere of which man too partakes. And when even one species is wiped out, the delicate balance is upset. A chain is as strong as its weakest link. The more the number of species threatened by extinction, the more shaky the foundation of human survival itself.

As this is the first year the eggs are being studied at the hatchery, data regarding incubation periods and nesting habits are being gathered. In the years to come perhaps more pioneering work could follow. The first eggs have just hatched and the babies are pawing their way into the world and crawling back to the ocean. It will be a short walk for them, but a sure stride for their species, up the slippery slopes of survival.

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