



Marine turtle update - India

In early 1982 our Research Officer J. Vijaya photographed hundreds of Pacific ridley sea turtles being taken off to market from Digha Beach in West Bengal. India Today, India's equivalent of Time Magazine published a few of these pictures with a brief on what the totally protected status of Schedule I on India's Wildlife Protection Act really means in the field. Soon after, a letter campaign was initiated by Dr. Nicholas Mrosovsky of the IUCN Marine Turtle Group and Mrs. Gandhi received letters from all over the world appealing for careful management of a valuable resource. The fact that the turtles were caught while breeding off the Orissa coast where there is a massive annual arribada (with over 150,000 females coming up to lay on a 15 km. beach in three days), made it all the more imperative to stop it. Events for sea turtle conservation which happened following this publicity are:

- a) Enforcement by the authorities (Forest Department and Police) in West Bengal has at least slightly curtailed the turtle smuggling which has gone underground. Turtles are now stored in ponds away from the beach and are transported at night according to Vijaya who made a return visit in early 1983.
- b) Increased interest by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (Cochin) which came out with a special publication on sea turtles (see references).
- c) The Tamil Nadu Forest Department set up 5 hatcheries, between January and April 1983 on the coast between Madras and Ramswaram.
- d) The Department of Environment constituted an "Indian Sea Turtle Specialist Group" with the following members:
 1. Shri J.C. Daniel, Member
Indian Board for Wildlife Chairman
 2. Shri Romulus Whitaker, Director
Madras Snake Park Trust
 3. Shri S. Bhaskar, Naturalist
 4. Shri Chandrasekar Kar, Research Officer
Crocodile Breeding Project, Orissa
 5. A representative of Director,
Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta
 6. Dr. E.G. Silas, Director
CMFRI, Cochin

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7. Dr. S. Mahadeva, Officer-in-charge
EMFRI, Regional Office, Mandapam.

8. Shri P. Kanan, Deputy Director
Wildlife Preservation, Bombay

Convenor

e) We recently had communication with the FAO Bay of Bengal Project (Fisheries) and interest was expressed in the turtle excluder net designs. If an offshore limit of 5 kilometers was set and the excluder nets used the arribada wouldn't be so badly hit each year. In the 1983 season, for example, an estimated 7500 drowned turtles were washed up on the Gahirmatha beach (Silas, et al., 1983). This year optimum depths and ranging dynamics of the mating turtles off the arribada beach will be studied to arrive at meaningful conclusions on which to base recommendations. It is also hoped that with the help of the Coast Guard, inshore use of trawlers and gill nets can be suspended for the few days of the arribada.

f) Satish Bhaskar's sea turtle survey project, supported by WWF-India was renewed and he is now tromping the beautiful beaches of the islands in North Andaman.

References:

Kar, C.S. and S. Bhaskar 1983. The status of sea turtles in Andamans. Bull. Cent. Marine Fisheries Research Inst., 34:94-97

Bobb, D. 1982. Massacre at Digha. India Today, 31:64-65.

Kar, C.S., 1982. The Gahirmatha sea turtle rookery, Orissa. Makara, 3(1):20-23.

Silas, E.G. et al, 1983 Marine Fisheries Information Services, T&E Series No.50: Management and Conservation of sea turtles, pp. 1-40.

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