

A NOTE ON SEA TURTLES OF MADRAS

BY

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For the past four years, the Madras Snake Park Trust staff and volunteers have been collecting sea turtle eggs on the coast of Madras, incubating them at India's first sea turtle hatchery and releasing the young.

The sea turtle which nests on our coasts is the Pacific or Olive Ridleys. It is almost 1 metre in length and weighs 50 kg. The females come ashore two or three times during the egg laying season, (end December to mid March). Each time, the female lays about 100 ping pong ball sized eggs in a hole dug above the tidal line with her hind flippers. Watching her ponderous struggle up from the sea is seeing something right out of the ancient reptile era over 100 million years ago.

Sea turtles are killed throughout the world for their meat. In Tamilnadu the Green Sea Turtle is regularly slaughtered in Tuticorin Market, and the Ridleys is harvested on the Orissa and Bengal coasts. Extensive killing and egg collection has brought some sea turtles close to the danger point. Before this happens to the sea turtles off our coasts, we hope that efforts are made by the Central and State Fisheries and the Forest Departments to protect the nesting beaches and initiate studies on these fascinating and economically valuable reptiles.

Pilot farming projects would be ideal agencies for proving the commercial viability of sea turtle harvests on a carefully controlled basis (to avoid over-exploitation) on our islands like the Lakshadweeps, Andamans, those off Ramanathapuram and in the Gulf of Kutch.

The sea turtles which have been observed feeding and/or breeding on our coasts and islands are:

Common Name	Scientific Name	Feeding	Breeding	Commercial value
Olive Ridleys	<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>	Whole East Coast	Whole East Coast	Meat, leather, calipee
Green Sea turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	Andamans, S.E. Coast, Lakshadeep	Andamans, Lakashadweep, Ramanathapuram	Meat, leather, calipee
Hawksbill turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>	S.E. Coast, Lakshadweep	Lakshadweep	Shell, calipee
Leatherback	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	Andamans	Andamans	Oil
Loggerhead	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	S.E. Coast	?	

Madras and vicinity—sea turtle hatching data (MSP hatchery)

Season	No. of nests	Total eggs Collected	Collection Dates	Hatchings released	Release (Hatching) dates	%	Average hatching period
1973-1974	11	1,272	22/12/73-9/1/74	925	21/2/74-7/3/74	73	57 days
1974-1975	17	1,813*	26/1/75-3/3/75	744	8/3/75-17/4/75	43	50 days
1975-1976	37	4,029	29/12/75-15/2/76	2,409	16/3/76-15/4/76	60	51 days
1976-1977	132	14,546	23/1/77-12/2/77	8,981	10/3/77-31/3/77	62	48 days

* 500 destroyed by dogs

The Madras Snake Park Turtle Hatchery is located at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Jean Delouche at Thiruvanmiyur, Madras-41. Our standard procedure is to walk about 10-15 km per night from about 9 p.m. to 1 or 2 a.m. and collect eggs from intact nests. We have found that on the 50 km stretch between Madras and Kalpakkam, 90 % of nests are robbed by humans, dogs and Jackals in that order of frequency. Fishermen do not take the eggs. Professional egg collectors from Madras and villages inland walk the beaches during this season and collect the eggs for sale in the markets at 5 to 10 paise each.

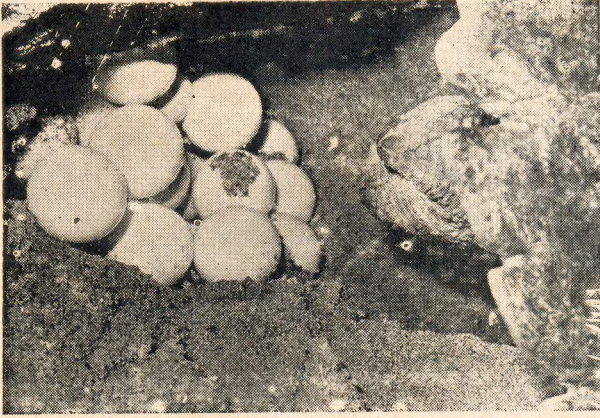
The export of sea turtles and their products is banned by the Central Government. The State Government would be wise to start protecting the nesting beaches and controlling the sea turtle harvest. In February 1976 for the first time, a huge Riddleys rookery on the Orissa Coast was protected and a total of 1,58,161 nesting turtles marked by that State's Forest Department. Roughly 10 million eggs were saved by this timely action.

In the 1977 turtle season the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute sub-station in Madras teamed up with the Madras Snake Park. Several professional egg collectors were paid to bring nightly collections of eggs to the hatchery. A base market rate was paid, a breakdown of the economics of the 1977 egg collection follows:

14,546 eggs at Rs. 6/- per hundred	=Rs. 870/-
35 metres chicken mesh, primer paint	=Rs. 200/-
Posts, palm leaves, binding wire	=Rs. 75/-
2 man hours per day maintenance and release - 70 days	=Rs. 175/-
Total	Rs. 1320/-

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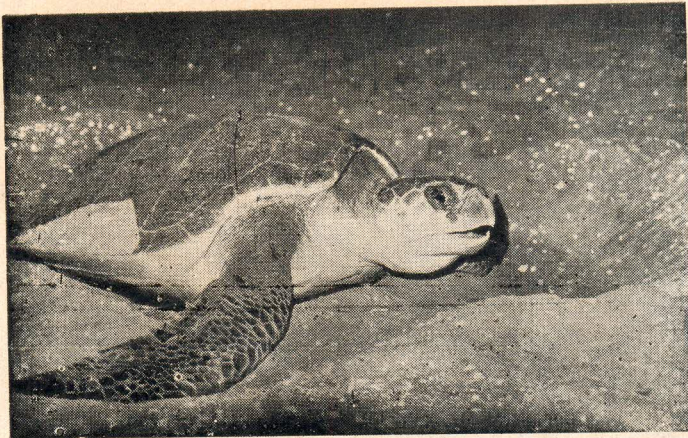
When we treat sea turtles and the rest of our wildlife as important resources for tourism, meat, leather, sport and other revenue earning (besides considering their critical role in the ecology), we have hope of achieving their effective protection.



Different
angle, no?
must use this
print more.

Eggs drop from the cloaca
into the nest hole,

One day old hatchlings in a
tub before being released
into the ocean.



Female *Ridleys* (*L. olivacea*)
laying her eggs on the
Madras beach.