CONSERVATON OF THE OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLE IN MADRAS: THIRTY YEARS AND COUNTING

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It seems like there is renewed interest in sea turtles this year in Madras. The newspapers have been full of the olive ridleys, which migrate to the beaches of Chennai each year (as they do throughout the east coast of India) to nest. They have lamented the death of the ridleys, most often drowned in trawl fishing nets, and eulogised the many groups working towards their conservation.

None of this should be surprising. After all, Madras is in some sense the birthplace of sea turtle conservation in India. In 1972, a group of dedicated wildlife enthusiasts, nature lovers and beach bums started walking the beaches of Madras to document the status and threats to olive ridley turtles. Among these were Rom Whitaker, founder of Madras Snake Park Trust and the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, and Satish Bhaskar, who walked thousands of kilometres, including most of India's beaches, mainland and islands, in search of sea turtles. Curiously enough, the 'other' sea turtle conservation and research program in India got started at about the same time. Though locals had been exploiting the eggs at Gahirmatha for many decades, the presence of a mass nesting beach was not known to science till J.C. Daniel and S.A. Hussain of the Bombay Natural History Society indicated its presence in 1973. The following year, H.R. Bustard, an FAO Croc consultant was conducting a crocodile survey in Bhitarkanika, when he 'discovered' the mass nesting rookery in Gahirmatha and declared it as the 'world's largest'. Subsequently, a conservation and research program was initiated by the Orissa Forest Department.

In Madras, the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust started sea turtle conservation, maintaining a hatchery where eggs were relocated (about 200 nests were collected in 4 years). In 1977, the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) became involved and established a hatchery for research at Kovalam. They purchased eggs for their research program and maintained the hatchery till the early 1980s. From 1982 to 1988, the Tamil Nadu Forest Department maintained several hatcheries along the Tamil Nadu coast, three near Madras and two near Nagapattinam.

In the 1980s, 'turtle walks' gained in popularity, and were organised mainly by the World Wide Fund for Nature, but also by a number of other smaller groups. Often, the groups would collect eggs during their walks and relocate them at the Forest Department's hatcheries. Some of these 'walkers' were in the prime of their youthful enthusiasm (or foolishness) when the Forest Department decided to close down their hatcheries in 1988. Two of them, Tito Chandy and Arif Razak, decided that the sea turtle conservation program in Madras should be continued. They were soon to be joined by Tharani Selvam, Yohan Thiruchelvam and the author. Since then turtle conservation in Chennai has been synonymous with the 'Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network' (SSTCN). Every season, this group establishes a hatchery at Nilankarai, and each night from end-December to mid-March, the stretch from Besant Nagar to Nilankarai is patrolled. Some years, when there were enough volunteers, the patrolling extended 5 - 10 km beyond Nilankarai. Hatchlings are released from February to April, and the nests are excavated to account for hatching success. Every weekend during the season, public and students from Madras accompany the SSTCN on the turtle walks and are educated about sea turtles and conservation.

One fairly remarkable aspect of the SSTCN is that it has never been 'run' by anyone but students. While a few senior members have advised, the group has always passed on the mantle from one generation of students to the next. Though these students have come from various schools and colleges, and the whole transition process has been informal to the point of being chaotic, the organisation has survived, which shows how powerful an idea can be once it has taken root. What makes the SSTCN's program such a good thing? Many have asked about the point of releasing a few thousand

hatchlings, when the problems that face them are seemingly insurmountable. The answer to that lies in viewing the program as an outreach program rather than a conservation one. Thousands of people have been on a turtle walk, many have seen hatchlings, which are indisputably amongst the most charismatic ambassadors of conservation, and a few have had the fortune of seeing a nesting olive ridley. Apart from the weekend participants, many core members have been motivated to pursue careers in ecology, wildlife and conservation.

One of SSTCN's 'failures', if it can be called that, was the attempt to involve local fishing communities in sea turtle conservation. In the mid 1990s, an attempt was made to start in-situ conservation, where a certain proportion of nests would be left on site. This was to be coupled with education and awareness programmes for the youth from the fishing villages, but the programme did not take off. This has been rectified during the last season by the efforts of the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and TRust for Environmental Education, who have involved the youth and the villagers from fishing villages in sea turtle conservation near their villages. The youth are involved in patrolling and monitoring their beaches, protecting the nest on site and relocation of endangered nests. They are spreading conservation awareness within fishing communities through talks, mobile exhibitions, turtle walks and camps.

Olive ridley turtles still face innumerable threats on the east coast of India. Habitat degradation, artificial illumination and massive incidental by-catch are major threats all along the coast. In Orissa, more than ten thousand turtles die each year, drowned in fishing gear. Much of this can be avoided by the use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDS), which are mandatory in that state. The Tamil Nadu Government has proposed the amendment of the Tamil Nadu Marine Regulation Act 1983 to deal with the devastation that has been wreaked by large mechanised trawlers along the coast here. The proposed amendments would bring in regulations regarding the size of the fishing nets and the dimensions of the holes, apart from making TEDS mandatory for all deep sea fishing vessels. It will also prohibit the indiscriminate dumping of juvenile fish on the shore by the trawlers when they dispose the day's catch.

However, as the Orissa example clearly shows, the establishment of laws is not nearly enough. There, the polarisation between trawler owners and conservationists has prevented meaningful dialogue and obstructed the use of TEDS. As a counter example, TEDs have recently been successfully introduced in Andhra Pradesh where the implementation was coupled extensively with workshops and awareness programs. Hence, education and awareness and, involvement of local communities will play a major role in the success of conservation efforts. It is in this area that progress has been made in Chennai. Recently, conservation programs have sprung up in Goa, Kerala, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. A broad network for marine conservation, responsible fisheries and coastal development will serve both the cause of sea turtles as well as other marine life.