

Turtle conservation by local communities in Madras

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Although the major nesting grounds of the olive ridley turtles are in Orissa on the east coast of India, there are sporadic nesting beaches of these turtles along the beaches of Chennai (Madras). There has been a drastic decline in the nesting population due to urbanization, predation of eggs and hatchlings by dogs, crows and poaching by man. It is in this context that TREE initiated its sea turtle conservation programme on the Chennai coast.

TREE is a registered charitable trust involved in environment education. TREE's mission is:

- ◆ To respect and have compassion for all living and non-living sources
- ◆ To promote understanding of all cultures and inspire each individual to take action
- ◆ To make this world a better place for environment, its flora and fauna, and the human community.
- ◆ To foster symbiotic and harmonious existence between nature and man.

TREE is a member of, and is inspired and guided by Dr. Jane Goodall's Roots and Shoots International Network. TREE helps create environmental awareness among children and youth and the general public. The target group includes the fishing communities along the east coast (Bay of Bengal) from Marina (Chennai) to Marakanam in Chengalpet District, Tamil Nadu numbering around 30 villages.

Sea Turtle Project of TREE (2003)

TREE started its first campaign to conserve and protect olive ridley turtles along the east coast, specifically from Nilankarai fishing village to Injambakkam fishing village (~ 3 km) and Panayur fishing village (~ 3 km) during December 2002. Selected youth from the above villages attended a one-day workshop at Madras Crocodile Bank Trust in July 2002, and planned activities like tree planting and planned waste disposal. For sea turtle conservation, the youth from the above villages named themselves as *Kadal Aamai*

Padhukavallargal [KAP] (Sea Turtle Protection Force) After receiving guidance on night patrolling and hatchery maintenance from members of the Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network, Chennai, the KAP members of Nilankarai and Injambakkam (from December, 2002) and Panayur and Nainar (from February 2003) have been patrolling the beaches of their respective villages and keeping track of the turtles nesting sites.

Initially, the members were disillusioned on seeing the number of dead turtles, which numbered around 14 and 10 respectively in Neelangarai and Injambakkam. But on 22-01-03 night the members sighted their first nesting turtle. The next day an enclosure (about 4' x 4') was erected on the nest site itself with 4 bamboo poles and chicken mesh, in order to safeguard the nest. It is hoped that this will also protect the hatchlings when they emerge. Relocation of eggs is not encouraged unless the clutch is below the high tide line or otherwise threatened.

Besides these, 17 more nesting sites were located by KAP members during this season. The areas were not cordoned off, but the location was identified and recorded in a logbook maintained by the members to keep track of the arrival of the hatchlings. On 01-02-03, the members of Neelangarai KAP were delighted to see the first batch of hatchlings from a wild nest (about 45) moving towards an artificial light source. Members of KAP immediately rescued the hatchlings and directed them towards the sea and ensured that they reached the sea. The constant vigil by the members will continue till the end of the season.

This is the first effort towards involving the local fishing community youth for the conservation of the ridley turtles on this coast. TREE hopes that this will help reverse the bleak situation of these endangered turtles as well as to restore the ecological balance and promote harmonious co-existence with nature.