

## ARTICLES



# SSTCN YEAR 26 – LOOKING BACK AT THE SEASON GONE BY

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## INTRODUCTION

In 26 years of the history of the Students' Sea Turtle Conservation Network, the last few years really stand out! Though there have been a few outstanding years here and there in terms of nesting abundance, the combined count of hatchlings released over the last 4 years, which is more than 80,000, surpasses the combined release from the 15 years prior.

There are two reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, four years ago, we started monitoring the popular Marina Beach, north of the Adyar River. Previously, we had only monitored the more secluded 7 to 10 km south of this river mouth. We had always assumed that since Marina Beach was a well known commercial attraction, with a lot of human activity and disturbance, sea turtles would not nest there. Also, with limited human resources, we were only just able to manage the stretch we had monitored previously.

Secondly, there does appear to be an increase in the number of turtles that are congregating and nesting on these beaches. While the reasons are unclear, it could relate to the partial or total destruction of beaches just north of Chennai due to industrial activity, as a result of which turtles which used to nest on those beaches have shifted south. It could also be a result of an overall increase in the nesting turtle population along the Coromandel coast.

## OMINOUS START TO 2014

All four nesting seasons began distressingly, with 50-60 dead turtles washing ashore within the first few weeks, all likely drowned in trawl nets. In several districts, necropsies were performed on these turtles and the cause of death was confirmed as drowning. In Cuddalore district alone, 30 turtles were examined, and same cause of death was attributed to all of them. By the end of each of the last four nesting seasons, the number of dead turtles was greater than 200.

In 2013, SSTCN petitioned the Chief Minister's "Special

Cell" asking for the Fisheries Department to ensure that trawlers not enter near shore waters and also to make it compulsory for trawlers to use TEDs during turtle season, but no action appeared to have been taken. This year, the vernacular press publicised the turtle mortality, but unfortunately targeted the Forest Department for inaction. The Forest Department are not directly culpable, as they do not have authority over the trawlers. The Fisheries Department is the regulating authority and has not, so far, taken any action. As a consequence of media attention, the Forest Department buried the turtles.

By the third week of January, our dead turtle count was already 120 and we had barely collected any nests. Though the dead turtle count kept mounting, we began to find a few nests and by the second week of February, there was a sharp decline in the number of dead turtles and the number of nests began to increase, a trend we have observed in each of the last few years. This might be related to when and where fishing occurs and the movement patterns of the turtles. January to March is peak season for fishing, and there has been an increase in the number of registered trawlers in recent years.

## THE PEAK SEASON IN 2014

Peak nesting occurred in February, as usual, with 120 nests, compared to 48 nests in January. On 10th February alone, we found 23 nests over 13 km. This may be compared to years where we found less than 20 nests in the entire season. The patrolling started around midnight as usual and went on till around 8am. The original two volunteers ran out of cloth bags to collect eggs and ran out of time as they had to get to work early in the morning. They were replaced by two other volunteers who went on to work till 8am. Our Marina hatchery watchman, Kumar, was active throughout, personally having found 5 nests and relocated 10, and was exhausted by the morning. The actual count would have been 26 but they couldn't find 3 nests, despite searching for quite some time! We need to relocate every nest as they are unsafe left behind due to the powerful lights on the beach, presence of stray dogs and also due to incidental poaching.

### **Nishanth's Role**

All our volunteers are special. They compromise a night's sleep every time they help monitor the beach. Many of them attend college the next day or go to work. But one person stands out over the others in the last three years. Last season, Nishanth personally collected 74 nests out of a total of 256. This year, he walked the beach on 66 out of a possible 100 nights and collected 78 nests. When he could not be present, he arranged for one of his many friends to take his place. He has already started a trust to carry out environmental education and conservation work in his locality. His team has initiated a programme to stop the use of plastic bags in their neighbourhood. They collect pieces of discarded cloth from tailor shops and use this to stitch cloth bags which they give to shops to use instead of plastic bags. This project has effectively reduced the use of plastic bags in his suburb. There is more... Nishanth is also a volunteer with Blue Cross and is called all over the city to rescue snakes and animals which have fallen into wells etc. We were all overawed one night when we learnt that he had travelled 150 km that day to rescue 5 snakes, 3 of them cobras, and then had rushed to join us for beach monitoring. He has rescued more than 100 animals, some of these in spectacular fashion. Nishanth has just graduated with an engineering degree this year, and we are hoping that he will continue to be work with us.

### **John's Role**

One of the key reasons for our success at managing the beach monitoring 'turtle walks' over the last four years has been the availability of one full time volunteer every year. This volunteer is willing to walk 6/7 days a week through the season and go to the hatchery whenever needed. This year's full time volunteer was John, an engineer by qualification who had worked in the IT industry before quitting. He was deeply troubled with the state of the environment and wanted to be a part of the solution in some way. He had volunteered in our forestation project in Thiruvannamalai, and we suggested that he would be more useful during these months in Chennai by volunteering for the turtle walks. He readily agreed to this and moved to Chennai. He was offered free accommodation in our activist friend Nityanand Jayaraman's office. John walked through the season with barely any breaks. We suggested that he skip the weekend walks as there were enough of us to manage, but he enjoyed interacting with the public about their perception of the environmental situation and ways to address it. The night that we located 23 nests, John had walked the entire southern stretch which is 8 km long, and then, hearing about the struggle in Marina beach, immediate-

ly went there to help and found 4 more nests! His help in monitoring the hatcheries too was invaluable. He is immensely talented and has had theatre experience and has now signed up with a travelling theatre group which is committed to creating awareness of environmental issues through the medium of theatre.

One of the unique features of SSTCN is that it offers an opportunity for youngsters to participate and get involved in the field of conservation. While it was John this year, it was a young chartered accountant, Raghuraman, last year, who had committed to working with us the entire season. The year before that, Karthikeyan, an environmental journalist had done the same. All the youngsters walking the Marina stretch have a very kind mentor, who guides them, inspires them and walks with them. 'Lakshmi anna' (elder brother), as they call him, has walked 9 seasons. If not for these dedicated youngsters, it would not be possible for us to manage the monitoring and maintenance of the hatchery.

### **WORKING WITH THE FOREST DEPARTMENT**

After a long hiatus, the Tamil Nadu Forest Department has begun direct participation in turtle conservation from this year. They have received funds from the Japanese government under the aegis of TBGP (Tamil Nadu Biodiversity Conservation and Greening Project). As a part of this, we were asked to conduct a survey of Cuddalore and Chennai districts and come up with a Species Conservation Action Plan (SCAP) for the two districts.

We did the Cuddalore survey, on foot, in June with many volunteers. We found some undisturbed, pristine beaches with lots of mangroves, but even on these beaches we found many dead turtles. We also found the presence of industry everywhere, threatening the future of marine ecosystems through unmitigated pollution. We found evidence of severe beach erosion due to the wharfs, sea walls etc. built on the beaches extending into the sea. In many places there was only ten metres of beach available with the sea having ingressed more than 150 metres.

The forest department set up a hatchery alongside ours and we initially monitored the beach together as our volunteers demonstrated to them how to find and relocate nests. We then began to walk at different times so that we could monitor the beach better. Despite some difficulties in coordination (our volunteers would waste time searching for nests which had already been removed), it was definitely a boon to have more people monitoring the beach. The fact that we found over 300 nests this season is testimony to this. By participating in the programme, the forest department too have a better

understanding of the difficulties at the ground level. We see this as a good model for the future where committed NGOs can partner with the Forest Department.

We released 22,678 hatchlings at our Besant Nagar and Marina hatcheries while the Forest Department released another 5,000 hatchlings. This is our highest ever in a given season and we feel a sense of hope for the future when we see the little turtles enter the sea.

## **PUBLIC INTERACTION**

The turtle walks have become a well-known cultural event in Chennai and draw huge crowds. We struggle to keep the group to a reasonably manageable number every weekend. We decided that we would focus on students of schools and colleges and individuals rather than work with large groups.

For the first time this year, we also started interacting with the public in Tamil, the local language. Harish, who has been with us for four years now, has acquired the expertise to interact with the public very well and anchored the Tamil interaction. This was a hugely popular decision with many participants feeling very comfortable in their own mother tongue.

## **HATCHLING RELEASE**

We released hatchlings several times during a 24 hour cycle. The hatchlings rarely emerged during the day, but when they do we release them immediately to reduce the chance of dehydration. However, the main hatchling release occurs just after dusk in the evening, when the crows have retired for the day. We also check the hatcheries at 10pm, 12am, 4am and 6am. Often the evening release will continue till 10pm as hatchling keep emerging, or the night release will go on from 10pm to 1am. Due to a large number of nests emerging on the same day, we often released several hundred hatchlings in a single evening! Both our watchmen, who are from the fishing community, are invaluable in monitoring the hatcheries around the clock, but Kumar Anna from the Marina hatchery is a great asset as he even sleeps in the hatchery to be available all the time and involves his whole family when needed.

The hatchling release programme drew huge crowds, mainly children too young to undertake the over-night walk. There were many children everyday to cheer the

young turtles going in to the sea. This seems like a very valuable interface to have young children interact with nature as they always seem to feel touched and keep coming back. Shravan, who has been with us 9 years now, continued to take charge of the Besant Nagar hatchery while managing his business and snake rescue! We have reached out to around 5,000 people this season. Around 1,500 people came for the walks and around 3,500 people participated in the hatchlings release.

## **CETACEAN STUDY**

Early in the season, we were contacted by conservationist and Cetacean Expert Dipani Sutaria and Rahul Muralidharan from ATREE to help with their Cetacean study. They conducted a workshop for us on the procedures and methods. The volunteers were excited to learn about the Cetaceans and the amount of knowledge that could be acquired from live and dead strandings. We plunged in to the task with great enthusiasm and provided information to them. We also released some stranded dolphins back in to sea. One of these is thought to be a striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*). We hope to continue on this front in the upcoming season.

## **COMMUNITY CO-OPERATION**

Last, but not the least, we are very grateful to all the fishermen along the coast who have helped us identify many nests whose tracks had been obliterated by the incoming tide. The fishermen have always been friendly to us and have supported us in whatever way they can. This year we also came across a few injured turtles. On such occasions, we contacted Dr. Supraja Dharini from TREE Foundation who immediately agreed to take the turtles and provide the necessary medical care.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of the season we have mixed feelings. We are happy that we released our highest number of hatchlings and for the wonderful work put in by the volunteers. But, we are also worried about the number of dead turtles and are determined to do something about it. A promising development has been the return of Adhith, one of our most experienced volunteers and a trustee with SSTCN. He will dedicate the next five months to reaching out to educational institutions and other stakeholders, such as fishing community members and the fisheries department.