

LEATHERBACK TURTLES ON THE MAINLAND COAST OF INDIA

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Leatherback records have been few and far between on the mainland coast of India. Interviews with fishermen over the years suggest that leatherbacks do, or did, nest along much of the Indian coast, but the numbers have not been large, at least not in the last century (see Shanker and Choudhury, 2006). In fact, in his guide to the Marine Aquarium in Madras, Henderson (1913) writes that the 'leathery turtle' is rare on the South Indian coast (see Frazier, 2011). He notes that a specimen was captured on the Guntur coast in April 2011, but was not brought to the aquarium.

However, local fishermen in Kerala had informed T.H. Cameron, an English officer stationed in Quilon, that a large number of leatherbacks were caught at the turn of the century but the numbers had already declined (Cameron, 1923). According to them, about 40 turtles were caught annually either while coming ashore or with nets at sea. They were often seen in the vicinity of Tangacheri Reef. Cameron attempted to obtain a leatherback specimen and finally located one, but it was sold while being transported from his office, probably for consumption.

Most of the fishing net capture and stranding records are from the Gulf of Mannar in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra. While the records may not reflect actual distribution, the higher frequency of occurrence in southern India may not be surprising given that the nearest extant rookery is in southern Sri Lanka (Ekanayake *et al.*, 2002). While most records have been of captured or stranded turtles, Jones (1959) recorded a nesting event at Calicut, Kerala, in July 1956.

Southern Kerala is one of the few places in the world where leatherback meat is consumed. As recently as 2002, a leatherback turtle caught in a gill net at Vizhinjam was butchered and the meat transported to a

nearby market for sale at Rs. 20 per kg (Krishna Pillai, 2003a, b). On another occasion, a captured leatherback was released due to the efforts of a foreign tourist who was present at the harbour (Krishna Pillai *et al.*, 2003a).

Additional leatherbacks have been released through the efforts of the community or forest officials (Krishna Pillai *et al.*, 2003b; Balachandran *et al.*, 2009). The most recent records of leatherback strandings are from the Gulf of Mannar (Balachandran *et al.*, 2009) and Vizhinjam (Anil *et al.*, 2009), both in 2008. In both cases, the turtles were rescued from fishermen with the help of forest officials and released.

Krishna Pillai has compiled lists of leatherback records on the Indian mainland (Krishna Pillai and Thiagarajan, 2000; Krishna Pillai *et al.*, 2003a). Table 1 contains an updated record of all leatherback sightings and strandings on the mainland coast over the last century.

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Table 1. Leatherback records on the mainland coast of India from 1923 to 2012.

Date & Year	Location	Carapace		Plastron		Flipper length			Sex	Weight (kg)	Stranded/ Caught (gear)	Reference
		Length (cm)	Width (cm)	Length (cm)	Width (cm)	Fore (cm)	Hind (cm)	Head length (cm)				
1923	Off Quilon	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	F	-	-	Cameron, 1923
1959	Calicut	190.5	-	116.8	-	-	-	-	F	-	-	Jones, 1959
1976	Visakhapatnam	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Dutt, 1976
1982	Kovalam Madras	195	119	162	102	110	85	-	F	-	Stranded	Anonymous, 1982; Rajagopalan, 1983
1985	Devbag, Malavan	149.8	109	142.5	72.5	-	-	-	F	-	Stranded	Karbhari, 1985; Karbhari et al., 1986
1988	Mandapam	152	81	144.5	83	96	58	-	M	260	Gillnet	Rao et al., 1989
1989	Pamban	162	86	150	87	102	78	37	F	300	Trawl net	Krishna Pillai & Kasinathan, 1989
1991	Rameswaram	174	120	-	-	180	-	34	F	350	Trawl net	Krishna Pillai et al., 1995
1991	Colachel, Kanyakumari	173.2	132.4	154.7	86	106.7	68.8	39.1	F	250	Boat seine	Ebenezer & Joel, 1992
1998	Vizhinjam	150	-	108	78	100	78	39	M	250	Gillnet	Krishna Pillai & Thiagarajan, 2000
2001	Kovalam	93	68	-	-	-	-	-	M	110	Shore seine	Krishna Pillai et al., 2003a
2002	Vizhinjam, Kerala	141	106	-	-	-	-	24	F	-	Gillnet	Krishna Pillai, 2003a
2002	Pallithura, Kerala	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	F	-	Shore seine	Krishna Pillai, 2003b
2009	Manakudi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Tied to pillar	Balachandran et al., 2009
2009	Vizhinjam	170	80	-	-	89	-	25	-	-	Gill net	Anil et al., 2009