

LEATHERBACK TURTLE STRANDED DEAD AT UTUKUR BEACH, VIDAVALUR MANDALAM, NELLORE DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

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The leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is rarely observed on the coast of mainland India (Shanker, 2013). Here I report the occurrence of a dead stranded leatherback found on the shore near Utukuru fishing village, Vidavalur Mandalam, Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh, India, on 6th January 2013 (Figure 1). The turtle was discovered by TREE Foundation's Sea Turtle Protection Force members, from a local fishing community, while they were on their regular morning sea turtle patrol. The leatherback had two

injuries: a crushing wound on the top of the head, and a deep puncture on the left hind flipper. It was difficult to ascertain whether the injuries occurred pre- or post-mortem. The turtle measurements were as follows: curved carapace length= 122cm, curved carapace width= 81cm, head length= 36cm, front flipper length= 60cm, hind flipper length= 36cm. Although there was no scale available, I estimate the turtle weighed approximately 200kg, given that it took more than seven people to move the turtle for burial. Based on the size, I



Figure 1. Stranded leatherback turtle at Utukur Beach, Andhra Pradesh.

Photo credit: M. Prabhakara Rao

presume that the leatherback was a sub-adult, although smaller adult leatherbacks have been documented nesting in various locations (Stewart *et al.*, 2007).

The District Forest Officer of Nellore, Andhra Pradesh, and the Assistant Conservator of Forests, Kavali Range came to the beach site and conducted a detailed enquiry with the local fishermen on the possible cause of the injuries to this turtle, and other injuries to all turtle species in the region. Most sea turtle mortalities in the area appear to be the result of fisheries interactions and there has been an alarming increase in turtle mortality along the Nellore coast, from 13 dead stranded turtles during the 2012 turtle nesting season (January to April) to 78 dead stranded turtles observed between 22nd December 2012 and 6th January 2013 alone. Concurrently, there has been an increase in the gill net fishery effort along the Paderu River estuary in the conservation area, with an increase from 34 to 54

boats operating in the area over the past 7 months.

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Literature cited

Shanker, K. 2013. Leatherback turtles on the mainland coast of India. *Indian Ocean Turtle Newsletter* 17: 15-17.

Stewart, K., C. Johnson & M. H. Godfrey. 2007. The minimum size of leatherbacks at reproductive maturity, with a review of sizes for nesting females from the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Ocean basins. *Herpetological Journal* 17: 123-128. ■

HOW MANY HATCHERIES?

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Sea turtle eggs in the Indian Ocean and south-east Asia are often collected for incubation in a hatchery to reduce natural and human threats to nests, including poaching, predation, and beach erosion. Hatcheries may be maintained by governmental and non-governmental agencies for protection and/or education and outreach, or to provide income to local communities through ecotourism. To better understand the practices of hatcheries and the contribution to sea turtle conservation, we are conducting a survey to quantify the number of sea turtle hatcheries in this region and determine the

location of hatcheries and proximity to nesting beaches, number and species of eggs collected, methods of egg collection and transport, density and depth of nests, and practices of head-starting or holding hatchlings.

Interested persons involved with sea turtle conservation and management of hatcheries in countries throughout the Indian Ocean and south-east Asia are requested to email Dr. Andrea D. Phillott at andrea.phillott@auw.edu.bd to receive a copy of the survey. A summary of results will be published in a later issue of IOTN. ■