

## Second successive year of the Marine Turtle Conservation Project in Konkan, Maharashtra

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Of the five species of marine turtles occurring on the Indian coast, the olive ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea* is the most common on the Maharashtra coast. The present note is based on the current year's marine turtle conservation activities. The 'Marine Turtle Conservation Project' was initiated by Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra (SNM) on the coast of Maharashtra in 2002-03. Poaching of eggs and adults as well as incidental capture in fishing nets are the main threats to turtles in this area. This year, SNM conducted conservation work and successfully completed this programme in four villages in the district of Ratnagiri, Maharashtra. In the breeding season of 2003-04, SNM coordinated and undertook conservation work on four beaches: Velas, Anjarla, Saldure and Murud, all located in the district of Ratnagiri. A hatchery was erected on each beach and a person appointed as caretaker. Our team members and locals conducted daily patrols to locate nests. We arranged awareness programmes in these villages in the form of village meetings, lectures, and exhibitions. Our efforts also included distribution of handbills, stickers, and posters regarding turtle conservation. In the above four sites, the Marine Turtle Conservation Project protected a total of 3506 eggs from 35 olive ridley nests and released 1687 hatchlings.

**Velas** - Last year, the topography of Velas beach changed and became a little narrower. We located our hatchery on a small dune of sand about 10 metres away from last year's hatchery location. At Velas, we protected a total of 3028 eggs from 30 nests, and released 1500 hatchlings.

**Anjarla** - Located 5 kilometres south of Velas, Anjarla is located near an estuary mouth and has a beach measuring 4 kilometres. This village is a well-known tourist location as there is an old Ganesh temple located there. This beach is broad and adjacent to human habitation. Tourists regularly visit

this beach. Local accounts state that turtles used to nest on this beach in healthy numbers ten years ago, but as tourist activity increased there has been a decline in the number of nesting turtles. SNM decided to undertake a conservation and awareness campaign in Anjarla. Four nests were protected in Anjarla with a total of 385 turtle eggs, and 153 hatchlings were released.

**Saldure** - Saldure is 6 kilometres south of Anjarla, and has a 2 km beach which is connected to the next village beach of Harnai. At Saldure beach, from 15:00 hours to 23:00 hours there is continuous bullock cart traffic on the beach. This may affect nesting as no turtles were encountered on this beach.

**Murud** - Our fourth site was at Murud, some 8 kilometres south of Anjarla. Murud has a 2 km long beach which is quite broad. Beach resorts are present on these beaches and tourist activity persists until late in the night on the entire beach. Here also, locals have observed a decrease in nesting turtles in the last ten years. We found only one nest in the entire season. In total, 93 eggs were protected and 34 hatchlings were released.

**Table 1:** Month-wise nests, eggs, and hatchlings of olive ridley turtles

Month	No. of nests	No. of eggs	Hatchlings
Nov.03	1	133	N/A*
Dec.03	15	1454	N/A
Jan.04	13	1256	226
Feb.04	5	534	847
Mar.04	1	129	534
Apr.04	N/A	N/A	80
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>3506</b>	<b>1687</b>

\* Information not available

This year, we found two dead adult olive ridley turtles on Murud beach, and one young green turtle

*Chelonia mydas* at Saldure. Another turtle was found caught in a torn fishing net near the beach at Murud and released by locals. At Velas, a nest was completely eaten by a jackal, and eight other nests were partly robbed by jackals. They even attempted to enter the hatchery by digging under the mesh. To prevent this, we buried the mesh deeper. We also encountered difficulties due to attacks by jackals at the other sites. At Anjarla, we protected 4 nests, yet 5 others were lost to jackals. At Kelshi, some 3 kilometres from Velas, two turtles were killed and partially eaten by striped hyenas. Last year at Velas, the SNM protected a total of 5,372

eggs from 50 nests and released 2,734 hatchlings. In the 2003-04 season, we protected 3,506 eggs from 35 nests in four places and 1,687 hatchlings were released. This year we found much fewer nests (3) on the Velas coast, compared to last year (50).

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