

## **Turtle conservation & community development: Activities of the TREE Foundation**

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The TREE Foundation is a registered charitable trust, founded in 2002. Since that time we have initiated several environmental education programmes in Panchayats and in state-aided and private schools along the coast of Chennai. We have managed to conduct intensive programmes in several fishing villages during this year. The villages include Periya Neelangarai, Injambakkam, Pannayur, Nainar Uthandi and a few others. Our vision is to cover a stretch of 120 km from Chennai to Marakkanam. It is our endeavor to educate the people living along the coastline, not just of the need to save the olive ridleys that nest along our shores but, more importantly, that each and every species is interdependent and that we must therefore take care of our environment.

### **Environmental education**

In October 2003, we conducted programmes in 11 schools along the East Coast Road reaching a total of about 4,965 children. We conducted painting competitions in December 2003 to encourage children to take extra effort to learn about

conserving sea turtles which was the theme of the event. About 43 children participated. A sand modeling competition was held simultaneously in 4 villages for the fishing community youth and huge replicas of the olive ridley were made by groups in each village. It was a windy, rainy day despite which the teams went about their task enthusiastically. Sixteen children and 98 youths took part in this event. The highlight of all these events was a street play "Niraindha Kattumaram" which means 'The Overflowing Catamaran' performed in all the five villages on January 10 and 11, 2004. This was presented by college students trained in folk theater (*Karupu Koothu*) and a fledgling group, *Alai Koothu* (a cultural unit of TREE foundation). This play highlighted the fact that fishermen could help to increase the wealth of the ocean and not just take away from it. It was explained that the yardstick of a healthy coastal environment and overall marine biodiversity is when a turtle returns to its natal beach to nest. Pamphlets in Tamil on the life and importance of the turtle were distributed immediately after the play.

## **Community involvement**

Apart from our sea turtle conservation programmes, TREE Foundation also held a Peace March on September 11, 2004 - International Peace Day. As a member of Dr. Jane Goodall's 'Roots & Shoots International Network,' we decided to take part in a programme that was being held all over the world by members of this network. A giant-sized peace dove was made using recycled materials and was carried with the help of 45 children and 130 youth from the fishing villages together with friends of TREE Foundation. They proceeded down the East Coast Road from Periya Neelangarai fishing village to Injambakkam, a distance of 3 km, carrying the message of peace. TREE Foundation has also instituted programmes concerning community development. We have started self-help groups (SHGs) among the youth in each of the 5 villages and attended the meetings of the already established women's SHGs to help motivate them. This has helped in raising the level of commitment and has brought families together in their endeavor to better themselves. We have conducted courses for these SHGs on vermiculture and composting with the help of Murugappa Chettiar Research Centre (MCRC), Chennai.

We also instituted the Turtle Protection Force (KAP- Kadal Aamai Padhukavalargall), which has been very active. Considering the fact that they

work on a purely voluntary basis, they deserve credit. At present, there are about 7-9 volunteers in each of the five villages patrolling a distance of about 10 km along the Chennai coast.

## **Future plans**

This nesting season has not been very encouraging. Only about 23 nests were sighted from January – February 2004. Beachfront lighting has caused havoc with the few hatchlings that did appear. We are tackling this issue by educating the communities that live along the beachfront. We hope this will help to reduce the casualties. Although the Forest Department has given us support by lending their presence at our meetings with the local fisherfolk, we are still searching for some means of lending credibility to our personnel who patrol the beaches at night.

Despite a few drawbacks, we have had a good year with regard to building awareness among the general public. Although we haven't been able to tackle the resorts along the beaches, we have managed to convince a good many fishermen to treat the turtle with respect and have dispelled the notion that a turtle brings bad luck. We welcome suggestions and help from larger institutions with similar ideologies. We have been able to cover much ground depending solely on volunteers and hope to make considerably more progress this year.