

NOTES

Take of sea turtles in Tamil Nadu and Kerala

During the first week of January 2004, I was surveying the coasts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala for sea turtles to extract tissue/blood samples for a conservation genetics project of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun, and Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad. I saw numerous sea turtle carcasses in many places along the coast in Tuticorin and Kanyakumari District (Tamil Nadu) and Vizhingam fishing base in Kerala. These mostly comprised olive ridley turtles. At many coastal villages such as Thirespuram (Tuticorin District), it was common to find turtles tied with a cord and left in shallow water pools near the beaches, waiting to be slaughtered and sold. There was a set protocol in terms of the place and time in the fish market for selling turtles. Turtle meat was usually

sold on Sundays and interestingly, people normally slaughtered or bought turtles only after attending church.

Generally, the turtles are placed upside down and cut open from the flipper. Fresh blood is collected in a vessel and distributed free of cost. The meat is sold at around Rs. 30-40 per kg. The take of turtles in this region is a traditional practice, but its current impacts on the stocks are unknown. Under the current legal framework, it is illegal as these sea turtles are listed in Schedule 1 of the Indian Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. Since the turtles are caught both intentionally and unintentionally (particularly while fishing), this threat needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

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