

Some observations on exploitation of sea turtles on the Kanyakumari coast

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Tamil Nadu, situated in peninsular India, has a coastline of about 920 km. The southern most district of Kanyakumari has a 70–km coast along the Arabian Sea and a 3–km coast along the Bay of Bengal. This district receives rainfall from the south-west monsoon for about 4 months from the middle of May to middle of September and north-east monsoon for about 3 months from end of October to December. There are about 46 fishing villages in Kanyakumari District (Table 1). Turtle fishing has been practiced along the Kanyakumari coast historically and there have been estimates of catches of several thousands of turtles per year in earlier decades. During recent years, the turtle catch was estimated to be about 1000 turtles per year (Kangappan & Wesley, 1998). The apparent decline in landing of turtles may be due to incidental catch in fishing gear, and illegal take of nesting female turtles. Turtle eggs are also collected for consumption and sold in fish markets. Information regarding the accidental catch and mortality of sea turtles due to fishing operation is restricted to the report of olive ridley turtles *Lepidochelys olivacea* at Kanyakumari (Krishna Pillai, 1998) and leatherback turtles *Dermochelys coriacea* at Colachal (Ebenezer and Joel, 1992). Kanyakumari, Colachal, Kodimuni and Thoothur are important trawler operation centres of Kanyakumari District, with about 350 trawlers operating daily out of Kanyakumari harbour. The Government of Tamil Nadu has sanctioned the construction of a fishing harbour at Colachal. Thengaipattinam is an important fishing village

with primarily shore-seines. The Thamiraparani River, locally known as Kuzhithurai River empties into the Arabian Sea near Thengaipattinam. The proposal to construct a harbour at Thengaipattinam is under consideration by the Tamil Nadu government, because of the repeated demand and request of the people of Thengaipattinam and nearby coastal villages.

On April 10, 2004, a female olive ridley turtle was caught in shore seine at Thengaipattinam near the mouth of the estuary. The turtle was 59 cm in length and weighed about 48 kg. It was auctioned for Rs. 400 and taken to the Thengaipattinam fish market, where it was sold. This was brought to the notice of the local Forest Department, following which a forest officer came to the market and made detailed enquiries. The department officers attempted to create awareness among the fishermen about the endangered status of sea turtles and necessity for their conservation. Enquiries revealed that sea turtles are caught in shore seines and taken on the beach while nesting. Enquiries also revealed that sea turtles are caught regularly in fishing nets and tied in the estuaries of Mankudy, Thenkaipattinam and Kadiapattinam for slaughtering on Sundays, when there is no fishing. Olive ridleys are caught regularly in Keezha Manakudy, Mela Manakudy and Arokiyapuram near Kanyakumari. Accidental catch of olive ridleys were also noticed in the trawler catch at Chinna Muttom.

Table 1. Fishing villages of Kanyakumari coast, Tamilnadu where marine turtles are caught.

S.No	Name	S.No	Name
1.	Arokiyapuram	24.	Puthoor
2.	Leepuram	25.	Kotilpadu
3.	Chinna Muttom*	26.	Colachel*
4.	Kanyakumari *	27.	Simoncoloney
5.	Vavuthurai	28.	Kodimunai *
6.	Kovalam	29.	Vaniyakudi
7.	Keezha Manakudy	30.	Kurumbanai
8.	Mela Manakudy	31.	Keelamidalam
9.	Amali Nager	32.	Malamidalam
10.	Pallamthurai	33.	Enayam
11.	Puthenthurai	34.	Enayam china thurai
12.	Kesavanputhenthurai	35.	Enayam Puthenthurai
13.	Pozhikkurai thurai	36.	Ramanthurai
14.	Periakadu	37.	Thengapattinam
15.	Rajakkamangalam thurai	38.	Eramanthurai
16.	Azhikaithurai	39.	Puthuari
17.	Pillaithoppu	40.	Thoothoor*
18.	Melathurai	41.	Chinnathurai
19.	Muttom	42.	Puthenthurai
20.	Sivathaman	43.	Vallavilai
21.	Kadiyapattinam	44.	Marthandam thurai
22.	Chinnavilai	45.	Neerodi
23.	Periyavilai	46.	Colankodu

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