

Interaction between the Sea Turtle Protection Force and trawler owners and workers at Kasimedu fishing harbour, Chennai

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Coastal gillnet fishing and other fisheries conducted from a multitude of smaller vessels are of increasing concern on the Indian coast. These fisheries practices can collectively have a very great impact on local sea turtle populations especially the olive ridley turtle. Turtles get entangled in gillnets, pound nets, and other fishing gear. Turtles entangled in these types of fishing gear may drown and often suffer serious injuries to their flippers from constriction by the lines or ropes. Trawls that are not fitted with Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) do not allow turtles to escape, which may result in mortality through drowning.

Since the number of dead turtles on the Chennai coast rose to 74 in the month of March 2006, Kadal Aamai Padhukavalargall (KAP) (Sea Turtle Protection Force) felt that Kasimedu fishing harbour should be targeted for spreading awareness about the importance of turtle conservation. Kasimedu fishing harbour is Chennai's largest mechanised and trawl boat fishing community.

The size of the fishing trawlers ranges from the smallest to very big commercial trawlers. In total, there are about 680 trawlers operating on daily basis and more than 5700 persons working on the

trawls. On conducting a series of meetings with the 4 major local unions of trawl owners and workers, the following information was collected by TREE Foundation's Kadal Aamai Padhukavalargall (Sea Turtle Protection Force).

Turtles get caught in bottom trawl nets, gill nets and ray fish nets. Many turtles caught in bottom trawl nets are still alive, very few turtles are caught in gill nets, but get entangled and die, and turtles that get entangled in ray fish nets always die. Small trawl boats operate from 6 km onwards as the cost of diesel escalates their cost. Most turtles are seen and caught incidentally in trawl nets near Pulicat (Pazaverkadu) area. Traditionally fishermen would not want a turtle to get caught in their nets, so if there is a device that would prevent a turtle entering the net, they would welcome it

The unions were all aware of the cleaning of the harbour by the KAP for the Coastal Cleanup Day which was organised by the India Coast Guard on September 16th 2006. KAP members used 5 fibre boats and 3 catamarans and cleaned the sea around the harbour and bridge areas for 2 hours, removing more than 2 tons of marine debris. The upkeep of the cleanliness of the harbour by KAP was appreciated by the unions.