

Achieving sea turtle conservation with the help and involvement of local communities in Morjim, Goa, India

Sujeetkumar M. Dongre¹ and Mahesh Kumar Shambhu²

*1 – CEE Goa State Office, Goa,
C/o SCERT, Alto Porvorim, Bardez Goa – 403521, India.
Email: sujeet.dongre@ceeindia.org
2 – Deputy Conservator of Forests, North Goa Division,
Goa Forest Department, Santa Cruz, Ponda, Goa, India.
Email: agmu161@ifs.nic.in*

Sporadic nesting of olive ridley turtles has been recorded all along the coast of Goa. Of the 120 km of coastline, about eight kilometres in Goa have been identified as major nesting sites and are being protected by the Goa Forest Department. These sites are Morjim in north Goa and Galgibag and Agonda in south Goa. Nesting takes place between October and March each year.

Realising that community participation is important for the success of conservation efforts, the Goa Forest Department has involved local communities at these nesting sites, and has worked with them for the protection of sea turtles since 1996. Locals are appointed as volunteers to protect nests and turtles and tens of hundreds of hatchlings are released into the sea every year.

Incidentally, these nesting beaches are also a major

attraction for tourists and generate revenue for the locals during the tourist season. When compared to the other beaches, Morjim is relatively pristine and secluded and has only recently started attracting tourists. Sea turtles have become one of the major attractions for tourists here. While excessive and unplanned tourism activities need to be controlled, locals can earn their livelihoods while protecting sea turtle nesting habitats. In order to come up with a suitable strategy, members of the local Panchayat were consulted and a meeting was held with other stakeholders along with the Centre for Environment Education (CEE), Goa and forest officials on October 4, 2007.

As a preparatory step, the Deputy Conservator of Forests and CEE held meetings with the Range Forest Officer and other Forest Department staff directly involved in turtle conservation in Morjim

on September 25, 2007. This meeting helped the Forest Department officials and CEE draw an agenda for the consultation with the Panchayat members. Issues such as involvement of locals in sea turtle conservation, monitoring and protection of turtle nests, and reduction of lighting on the seashore were discussed. The location of tourist shacks (maintenance of a 40 m. distance between shacks) and removal of deck beds from the beach were also considered.

The makeshift shack owners agreed to help the Goa Forest Department by agreeing to the points discussed above. The Goa Forest Department, with the help of local volunteers and communities, has succeeded in protecting six nests found so far this

year, of which one has hatched and 114 hatchlings were released. In some cases, nests laid near the shacks were shifted to safer locations and guarded with the help of volunteers and community members. On January 31, 2008, a turtle arrived on the beach in the evening and laid eggs under the protection of volunteers, departmental staff and shack owners.

The cooperation and participation of various stakeholders has been very effective. The Department and CEE are pleased with the participation and direction in which turtle conservation is directed and intend to use this experience as a stepping stone to evolve better conservation strategies in future.