

## **Five years of marine turtle conservation in Maharashtra, India (2002 – 2007)**

**Bhau Katdare**

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Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra (SNM) has been working on nature conservation, nature education, and nature research since 1992 in Maharashtra, India.

In 2002, SNM started a conservation programme for marine turtles in Velas, a tiny village on the northernmost boundary of Ratnagiri District in

Maharashtra. In its first year, SNM undertook protection of nests in one village and successfully protected 50 nests. Within a short period, SNM has spread its protection activities to the entire coast of Maharashtra: about 720 km. In the last five years, SNM has protected 214 nests and released more than 9000 hatchlings.

To make turtle conservation sustainable, SNM is trying to involve other local NGOs and volunteers.

This year, SNM is carrying out marine turtle conservation and awareness by community participation through a project from the UNDP-GEF Small Grants Programme. The project is being carried out in five villages in Ratnagiri District. The project includes hatchery management, nest monitoring, development of a long term conservation action plan, and development of alternative income sources to reduce pressure on natural resources.

**Table 1:** Number of villages covered & number of nests protected

No.	Year	Number of Villages covered	Number of nests protected
1	2002-03	1	50
2	2003-04	4	35
3	2004-05	10	31
4	2005-06	15	36
5	2006-07	27	62

SNM has arranged various types of awareness programmes including villager meetings, exhibitions, and slide shows. SNM has distributed hand bills and stickers about the importance of turtles and the need to take steps for their conservation. SNM has placed billboards at nesting sites and on well known tourist beaches. In addition, SNM has sent letters to the village panchayats, requesting them to promote sea turtle conservation in the respective villages.

To encourage turtle conservation, SNM decided to award a '*Kasav Mitra Puraskar*' (Turtle Friend Award). SNM's first *Kasav Mitra Puraskar* was awarded in 2004-2005 to Mr. Nandakumar Patil from Velas. The 48 year old Mr. Patil is the head of the village Panchayat. The award included Rs. 1000 and a certificate. In 2005-2006 an award for NGOs was also instituted. For the year 2007-2008, the *Kasav Mitra Puraskar* was awarded to Mr. Charuhas Tipnis, Mahad and to Ratnadurga Mountaineers, Ratnagiri.

SNM has also published a booklet 'Marine Turtle Protection and Conservation' in Marathi and distributed it free of cost to volunteers and persons interested in marine turtle conservation. This booklet contains brief information about marine turtles, threats and guidelines for their protection and conservation. The booklet was also translated into Gujarati and distributed to NGOs and volunteers in Gujarat.

In the last five years, egg poaching has been found to be the major threat to sea turtles. The number of dead turtles on the coast appears to be increasing in number. SNM is trying to get strong support from government authorities. As a result of these efforts, the Maharashtra State Wildlife Advisory Board has accepted a proposal regarding conservation of marine turtles in June 2007. The action plan for conservation includes hatchery management, active participation of the Forest Department, strong action against poachers, and training for forest staff.