

Satish “Batagur” Bhaskar

Rom Whitaker (as narrated to Janaki Lenin)

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In the early ‘70s the Madras Snake Park became a local hangout for young folks from nearby campuses like Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), AC College of Architecture and Madras Christian College. Thirty years later I run into some of these guys, sometimes in strange places. They’re now mostly as paunchy and balding as I am and we trade a few stories and get into laughing fits over “the good old days”.

One of the characters who showed up back then was a soft-spoken engineering student named Satish Bhaskar. He was a teetotaling non-smoker, a real ascetic compared to the rest of us. His passion was the sea, and he spent more time swimming than in the IIT classroom. It’s not for nothing that his hostel mates called him Aquaman (privately)!

I was concentrating on crocs at the time, and whenever I could get away from Snake Park it was to survey gharial, mugger and saltwater crocodile habitat across India. At the same time, we also wanted to know sea turtle status: which species come to Indian shores, where, when and in what numbers. So, we really needed a full time sea turtle man.

Opportunely (for the turtles), Satish was getting disenchanted with his IIT course (after finishing most of it) and yearned to be a field man with a mission. The Snake Park had a tiny research budget, but it was enough to hire Satish as Field Officer (Rs. 250 a month, approx. US\$ 28 based on exchange rates of that time) and get him out on his first few survey trips. When the fledgling WWF-India saw the good work he was doing for endangered sea turtles, Satish landed his first grant which really set him in motion.

About this time, the Madras Crocodile Bank was being born and Satish was its first resident. He helped to build the place (in between the sea turtle trips) but funds were so tight and sporadic that there were times when he had no work. So what did he do?

He kept in shape by filling a bag of sand, carrying it to the other end of the Croc Bank, dumping it and starting again! Villagers still remember Satish hoisting a 50 kg sack of cement over his shoulder casually as if it were no more than a sleeping bag. This was the training that made him so tough in the field; it enabled him to walk most of India’s entire coastline, more than 4,000 km, over the next few years looking for sea turtles, their tracks and nests! He loved going to remote places which few Indians have the stamina or stomach for. “To him, swimming in shark infested waters was the most normal thing to do,” declares Shekar Dattatri, who has known him since the early Snake Park days.

Old Jungle Saying: Satish is incredibly kind to people. If he has anything that someone wants, he gives it away.

In 1977, Satish conducted the first surveys in Lakshadweep and zeroed in on an uninhabited island, Suheli Valiyakara, as the place for a focused green sea turtle study. The only problem was that the main nesting period is during the monsoon and no one goes there when the sea is so rough. In 1982, Satish left his young wife and three month old daughter, Nyla to maroon himself on Suheli for the whole monsoon, from May to September. It meant making elaborate preparations, like calculating the amount of food he would need. We sat with Satish and talked about things that could go wrong during this isolation – chronic toothache, appendicitis, malaria were just a few sobering thoughts. The Coast Guard provided some signal flares and there was talk of a two-way radio but eventually Satish just set sail and that’s the last we heard of him till September.

Actually that’s not true. A few months later, his wife Brenda back in Madras, received a loving letter from him. He had launched his message in a bottle on July 3rd and 24 days and more than 800 km later it was picked up by a Sri Lankan fisherman, Anthony



Photo: The village of Kondul, Great Nicobar (2001). Satish first visited the Great Nicobar island in 1979, and then subsequently in 1981, 1992 and 1994.
Photo courtesy: Kartik Shanker

Damacious, who very kindly posted it to Brenda along with a covering letter, a family picture and an invitation to visit him in Sri Lanka. The ‘bottle post’ was very romantic, but of course Satish’s spin was that he was trying to see if he could study ocean currents using this technique!

An emergency situation did arise on the deserted isle, and one that none of us could have predicted: a huge dead whale shark washed up on Satish’s little island and started rotting. The nauseous stench became so overpowering that our intrepid sea turtle man had to move to the extreme other end of the tiny island to a somewhat precarious, wave lashed spit of sand.

That year the monsoon abated late. So though Satish was packed and ready to go home by September 1st, (after 3 ½ months with only turtles and a radio for company), the relief boat from Kavaratti Island, over 60 km away did not arrive. Satish had run out of rations and legend has it that he survived on milk powder, turtle eggs, clams and coconuts for weeks. Fortunately, the lighthouse on neighbouring Suheli Cheriyakara needed servicing and a Lighthouse Department ship, the MV Sagardeep, arrived on

October 11th. As Satish clambered aboard, Capt. Kulsreshta’s first words were, “Take him to the galley!”

For a person with a gargantuan appetite, Satish could live on very little. On a trip to the Nicobars, Indraneil Das and he ran out of rations and water and they still had a day’s walk ahead of them. The former was half-dead when they ran into a party of Nicobarese who tried to feed them but Satish politely and firmly declined saying they had just eaten and didn’t allow Neil to eat either. Later he pointed out that they had nothing to repay the poor people’s kindness! (This trip yielded five new species – two frogs, two lizards and a snake.)

On another occasion, on Little Andaman, Satish had again run out of rations and was surviving on “only biscuits and vitamins for 4 days.” He came upon an empty Onge tribal camp with some freshly barbecued turtle meat. He took some of the meat and left two biscuit packets in exchange mainly to avoid a spear through his back! Just counting the number of times he ran out of food in remote areas, we suspect that he deliberately starved himself to see how far he could take it.

Old Jungle Saying: Satish always travels with a kerosene stove and a pressure cooker. The former is to avoid burning wood as it is bad for the environment and the latter for cooking efficiency. He also carries an automobile inner tube to raft his supplies from canoe to shore and vice versa.

Through the 1980s, again thanks to WWF and other funds, Satish visited many of the islands of the Andamans. His were the first recommendations on sea turtle nesting beach protection. These helped give the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest Department a solid conservation basis to resist the efforts of big business and other Government Department interests in “developing” beaches for tourism.

Amongst all this serious work, he had time for research of another kind. Writing in Hamadryad, the Croc Bank Newsletter, he wonders if the sea krait was attracted to light, feigns dismay that this may be true and proceeds to try to make one climb his leg by playing with his torchlight!

By this time, Satish’s work was being appreciated by sea turtle biologists worldwide. Papers on the species inhabiting this region were very scarce indeed and his publications helped to fill that big gap. In 1979 Satish was invited to give a paper on the status of sea turtles of the eastern Indian Ocean at the World Conference on Sea Turtle Conservation, in Washington D.C. In recognition for his contributions to sea turtle conservation, Satish received a fancy watch and award from Rolex in 1984.

When Ed Moll came to India to do a freshwater turtle study, Satish became a key collaborator. He surveyed extensively for a highly endangered *Batagur baska* which nests on coastal beaches along with olive ridleys. Sadly the Bengalis have eaten the terrapin to near extinction and there are no known wild nests in India. It was at this time that he was nicknamed “Batagur Bhaskar”.

Old Jungle Saying: Satish has no sense of direction. He gets lost easily.

He spent many months, over several years, studying the hawksbill and green turtle nesting biology on tiny South Reef Island on the west coast of North

Andaman. He described this island as “one of ten sites most favoured by nesting [g]reen turtles in India”. Saw Bonny, a Forest Department Range Officer stationed on Interview Island, regularly risked his life ferrying supplies to Satish on South Reef Island, even during stormy monsoon weather. Bonny deputed a department staff member from his camp to assist Satish who was working alone. Emoye spent a few days on South Reef, got fed up and wanted to return. Since the currents were strong and Satish was an accomplished swimmer, Emoye requested him to go along with him.

Over the years shark fishermen regularly hauled in sharks from this very channel. The sea was rough, it was after all the monsoon season. Being a modest and understated narrator, Satish rated his swimming skills as “below par” and claimed that his snorkeling flippers gave him confidence. To keep warm during the more than two kilometre swim, he wore two shirts. Emoye rested frequently on Satish to catch his breath and together the two of them swam across the channel.

A party of shark fishermen were camped on the beach in Interview when our intrepid swimmers landed. One of them remembered meeting Satish earlier and enquired, “Still loafing around? Still jobless?” He thought Satish was an ambergris-hunter. It was already dark when Satish and Emoye set out across the island to the forest camp. Half way, a bull elephant in *musth* trumpeted his warning from just 30 metres away and started to chase them. The two men ran for their lives. Later Satish would recount, “I had done some distance running in college but the penalty for losing was never as dire.” Already exhausted from their long and arduous swim, they couldn’t continue running and the elephant showed no signs of relenting. Remembering a Kenneth Anderson story, Satish threw his shirt down while continuing to run and was gratified to hear the pachyderm squealing with rage moments later. With the animal distracted, the men could finally stumble onwards to the forest camp. They made a pact – if the shirt was intact, it was Emoye’s; if not, then Satish’s. The next morning they found the shirt in three pieces completely smeared with muddy elephant footprints, while one bit had to be recovered from a tree. He later posted the pieces back to Brenda with a reassuring note.

Old Jungle Saying: Satish trusts people implicitly and they, in turn, don't let him down.

In the mid 1980's WWF-Indonesia contracted Satish to study the huge, intensely exploited leatherback sea turtle rookeries on the beaches of the Vogelkopf, the western most peninsula of the island of New Guinea, in Irian Jaya. This was a logistically tough place to work. First of all, there was no access from the landward side and one couldn't even land a boat on the beach. This was why it had remained protected for so long. Then the people from neighbouring areas started taking tens of thousands of leatherback eggs. People swam ashore with jerry cans and sacks and floated the eggs back to boats.

However, Satish found a way to keep in touch. He would swim 100 m out to a passing longboat that was headed to Sorong, and hand his letters to someone on board with enough currency for stamps. There was one boat every 20 to 30 days. By late August 1985, he had tagged about 700 leatherbacks almost single-handedly.

Rather uncharacteristically, Satish never wrote up his report for WWF-Indonesia. I have no explanation why this happened nor did we ever discuss this. After a year had passed and there was no sign of the report, I was embarrassed as I had recommended him for the job. The document was sorely needed to put some laws in place very soon. I had my sense of justice as well so I wrote the report in his name.

Sadly, the 13,360 nests that he recorded in 1984 was probably the highest ever in recent years. Ever since then, the average number of nests has hovered way down around 3200. And this has resulted in yet another 'Satish myth' – the local people believe that Satish tagged the female leatherbacks with metal tags, and using a giant magnet drew all the turtles to his country! The local elders have refused to permit any more tagging of turtles on this beach.

Old Jungle Saying: He doesn't like to crawl into a sleeping bag on cold nights; instead he wears all his clothes. Sometimes, he buries himself, except his face which is covered by a mosquito net, in the sand to get away from inquisitive island rats, mosquitoes and sand flies at night. He usually sleeps out of sight

of others at camp, after playing a few riffs on his harmonica.

In 1993, while chugging past Flat Island, a small spit of land off the west coast of the Jarawa Tribal Reserve in the Andamans, Satish and his companions saw a pair of human footprints emerging from the sea and disappearing into the vegetation. Satish had evaluated this island as a prime green turtle nesting beach, and despite the others cautioning him of Jarawas (the hostile tribe who routinely finished off trespassers with arrows), Satish swam ashore. His companions watched in horror as he followed the footprints into the forest. While his friends feared the worst, he emerged from another side crouching behind a green turtle carapace, holding it like a shield. The fearsome tribals never showed themselves and Satish returned safely.

On a subsequent trip, some Jarawa came aboard the canoe. Satish later recalled admiringly that the Jarawa were powerful swimmers and he had been very impressed by the bow-wake their breast-stroke created. Everyone else cowered in the back while Satish calmly interacted with the tribals. The crew had already hidden the machetes and other metal objects that the Jarawa coveted for making arrow heads. Eventually the tribals left without harming anybody but did take some spoons.

Old Jungle Saying: Satish likes to catch everything.

Local intelligence was that the Galathea river, Great Nicobar, had a lot of crocodiles. After dark one night standing on the bridge spanning the river, Satish played his torch over the water. Suddenly his flashlight caught some small eye shines along the waters' edge and he got very excited thinking they were baby salt water crocs. So he crept down to the edge of the river to catch them, but they turned out to be large spiders! But he did have encounters with crocodiles. Once while lying asleep on a beach on Trinkat Island, Nicobars, he woke up to a rustling noise. He found a young croc looking at him through the mosquito net. In mock seriousness he later wrote, "I'm overlooking it this time but if the crocs that wake me get any bigger I'm headed back to Madras."

The Karen of the Andamans are particularly fond of Satish. He earned their respect by treating young and old

with courtesy and respect, and also with such exploits as swimming from Wandoor in Middle Andaman to Grub Island (a distance of about 1.6 km) and back, walking the entire coastline of Little Andaman even crossing swift streams such as Bumila and Jackson Creeks and doggedly surveying beaches no matter how big the obstacles. But that didn't stop the Karen from teasingly nicknaming Satish, *Cheto* (Karen for 'basket', as it rhymes with Bhaskar!). Several older Nicobarese remember "the man who came looking for turtles" even today, many years after his last visit. He was perhaps the only man to ever find a reticulated python on the tiny island of Meroe (between Little Nicobar and Nancowry). The Nicobarese, who frequent the island, had never seen this species there before and were duly impressed. This python was later handed over to the Forest Department in Port Blair.

Satish notched identification marks on the carapaces of turtles that came ashore to lay eggs. Later, a bunch of titanium tags was sent by the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service for tagging hawksbills on South Reef. In Vogelkopf, he tagged more than 700 leatherback turtles. There is no information on tag returns from any of these turtles. One reason may be that subsequent night surveys (after Satish left) were inconsistent on Andamans, Nicobars and Irian Jaya. Secondly, the English lettering which provides the return address means little to local people. Karen tribals have mentioned finding tags on turtles they ate but not knowing the significance of the metal, simply threw it away into the bush.

For not being a religious person at all, he has the morals of one. He doesn't like anyone to tell him what to do, which made my job as boss difficult. (But he was conscientious about sending reports so he didn't need to be reminded.) I clearly remember once when I suggested that he store his things in a tin trunk as they were being destroyed by termites, he took umbrage. "Would I tell you what to do, Rom?" he asked in his low pitched gruff voice with a touch of menace. I never made that mistake again! He is a perfectionist - wanting to do everything right and better than anybody else. He also has an exaggerated sense of justice - always rooting for the downtrodden (probably why he

got along well with tribals, villagers and field people). In many ways, he is very un-Indian.

Old Jungle Saying: Nothing is useless; anything "useless" was just something for which you haven't yet found a use.

Once while running to catch a bus to Mayabunder, his chappal broke. On being asked if he'd like to buy a new pair, he responded, "Only one broke - surely another one will wash up with the high tide". He tried very hard to keep South Reef clean of trash. On one occasion, he arrived in Madras with two sacks stuffed with rubber chappals that had washed ashore on the island. Legend has it that he took it to the recyclers.

After twenty years of doing some of the first baseline sea turtle surveys in the country, Satish retired to spend more time with his family. Soon thereafter, an UNDP (United Nations Development Program) - Wildlife Institute of India project did a more extensive survey of turtle nesting beaches. But since then, the 2004 tsunami has changed the profile of many Andaman and Nicobar beaches and we don't yet know where new beaches are forming, or how the turtles have responded to this change. We desperately need a new Satish Bhaskar to continue the work.

Satish now lives in Goa with his wife Brenda (who was by the way, the Snake Park and Croc Bank's secretary for many years!) and their three children (Nyla, Kyle and Sandhya). Satish is the man who kicked sea turtle conservation in India into high gear. There's a strong lesson in all this and an inspiration to young naturalists who wonder, "What can I do to help?" Satish's single-minded quest for sea turtles in his quiet, often unorthodox way, set the stage for the major conservation efforts being made today. Here's a prime example of how one person's passion for an animal and its habitat can help make the difference between survival and extinction.

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