

TAG Member Profiles

Andaman & Nicobar Environment Team

Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Background of the organisation:

In the late 1980s, Romulus Whitaker, Satish Bhaskar and Alok Mallick set up a base in Wandoor, South Andaman for herpetofaunal and other ecological studies in the islands of the Andaman and Nicobar. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands Environmental Team (ANET), a division of the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, was constituted in 1990. Five acres of land was bought in 1993 (with grants from Conservation International and the Royal Netherlands Embassy) at Wandoor on the southern tip of South Andaman, staff were hired and further grants enabled construction of a base for conservation, research, and education. ANET remains the main active environmental NGO and the only such research base in the islands.

Objectives:

ANET's primary aim is to help preserve and maintain the long term survival of as much of the Andaman and Nicobar natural biodiversity as possible, whilst recognising the needs of the settled human inhabitants and the threatened aborigines that depend on the natural resources that the forest and sea provide. Since extensive conservation work had not been conducted in the islands prior to ANET's formation in 1989, the team has found it necessary to tackle several different, though ultimately connected and complimentary fields. ANET aims to teach local people of the "workings" of these fragile island eco systems and help them understand the dangers of putting too much pressure on its resources. The team also endeavours to instill a greater level of environmental awareness by encouraging stakeholders to appreciate nature and develop an active interest in conserving the islands' wildlife and habitats while still earning a livelihood in a sustainable manner. Further to this,

ANET supports and trains local teachers, school children, settlers, members of the armed forces and administration, biologists, researchers, students, etc. to augment their network of individuals and organisations involved in conservation efforts.

Where we work:

ANET has had a wide presence in the islands, although currently, our activities are focused in specific beaches and habitats. Our collaborative sea turtle project work is carried out mainly in Little Andaman although surveys are now being done to re-open camps on key turtle nesting beaches in the Nicobars that were destroyed in the Tsunami. Our surveys also include beaches and other important habitats such as mangroves, the intertidal zone, canopy studies, etc. in various areas in South Andaman and Little Andaman. Extensive educational programmes have been carried out in schools of Havelock Island. A livelihood assessment has been carried out in Karen villages located in Middle Andaman Island.

Our past work with crocodiles and sea turtle surveys included all the islands in the Andaman group excepting Narcondam Island. This island was visited by a team from ANET in 2010 and is now being looked at as a potential heritage site. ANET, with other partners is also involved in studying mechanisms of sharing and cooperation through socio-ecological change in the Nicobar Islands, specifically Chowra, Kamorta (Central Nicobar), Little and Great Nicobar Islands. In the near future with other members of our team, ANET will also be involved in conducting training on basic socio-economic monitoring of reefs and resources for the Havelock and Neil regions which are highly influenced by the tourism economy but depend heavily on healthy reef ecosystems. Earlier,

ANET and others were involved in an educational programme with the schools of Havelock Island.

Activities:

Extensive studies on sea snakes, flora, marine turtles, herpetofaunal biogeography, bats, other small mammals, resource use, land use, rain water harvesting, coral reefs, invasive species, crocodile surveying and socio-economics have been undertaken. Other activities include assisting the Forest Department in ecologically suitable protected area management planning. ANET has an ongoing environment education programme and has collaborated with Centre for Environmental Education to produce a teacher-training manual in English and Hindi, ('Treasured Islands') for the schools in the islands.

Leatherback sea turtle monitoring programme:

The leatherback nesting population of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is the single largest in the Indian Ocean. The coastline and beaches of these islands were severely affected by the December 2004 earthquake and the subsequent tsunami.

Many important nesting sites in the region were badly affected and no information exists on the effect of these disturbances on the leatherback nesting populations of the region especially from the islands of Nicobar which are prime nesting beaches for the leatherback turtles in the Indo-Pacific region. This is largely due to the remoteness of the sites and logistical constraints in conducting such a study. In collaboration with the Centre for Ecological Sciences (Indian Institute of Science), Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Dakshin Foundation and the Department of Environment and Forests, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, we have been supporting and helping coordinate the monitoring of leatherback sea turtle nesting in some of the prime nesting beaches of Little Andaman Island in order to understand the post-tsunami recovery of nesting on these beaches. We have also been tagging the turtles and assist in collection of tissue samples for genetic analysis of these populations.

Support for the organisation:

The bulk of ANET's funding is provided by The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust. Financial support



for the leatherback turtle monitoring programme has been coming from MTCA, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment and the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science.

Plans for the future:

We intend to continue the current leatherback nesting monitoring programmes and also undertake tagging, monitoring and surveys in the more remote, though prime nesting beaches of the Nicobar group of islands.

We also intend to undertake more focused long term scientific data collection that would help understand the impacts of climate change on the sex-ratio of leatherback turtles of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Our objective is to involve more local community people in turtle conservation activities. This will not just serve as an alternate livelihood option for many local communities who are otherwise dependent on natural resources, but also help in increasing conservation awareness among the local communities.

Current data on leatherback turtle nesting from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are patchy. In collaboration with Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science and the Forest Department, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, we plan to undertake satellite telemetry studies on the leatherback turtles of the region that would help us understand the migration patterns of the turtles and also help characterise ecology and behaviour.

This information will be valuable in formulating meaningful conservation strategies for this critically endangered species.

Role within the network:

While there are a considerable number of organisations working on conservation of sea turtles, most of them are based in the Indian mainland. We are unique in being the only organisation based out of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an important

and prime nesting site for sea turtles of all four species that occur in India, namely Olive ridley, Green, Hawksbill and Leatherback. In addition, nesting sites of the leatherback turtles in the country are entirely restricted the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Our organisation has been based in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the past 20 years and we have been involved in sea turtle conservation in the region for more than 2 decades. Through our years of involvement in conservation related work in the region, we have built considerable rapport with the local communities (both indigenous and mainlanders) as well as the resource managers (Forest Department). We already have a strong platform of sea turtle conservation history in the islands from where more focused conservation and research actions can be launched. This is what we have to offer to the TAG.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are an isolated group of islands from the Indian mainland and so are the conservation groups and their activities. The Turtle Action Group would provide an excellent opportunity not only to highlight our work and activities to groups of similar interests in the country, but also help to share and learn from experiences and best conservation practices from other parts of India. This knowledge we feel is vital to the evolution and long-term goals of our organisation.

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