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## Government orders mast lights to be switched off!

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Chennai has seen what is possibly a first in India – Mast lights along the eight kilometer stretch of beach from Neelangarai up to the Adyar estuary will now be switched off during the turtle season to prevent disorientation of olive ridley hatchlings emerging from nests laid on the beach.

Volunteers from the Students' Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN) have monitored nesting and hatchling emergence along this stretch of beach since 1988. In recent years, 6 powerful mast lights had been put up on this stretch of beach and were kept on every night through the year.

While SSTCN volunteers patrol the beach throughout the season locating and monitoring nests, they still miss a few because the turtle nested very early or late, between patrols or the large number of people using the beach obscured the turtles' tracks. Hatchlings from these 'wild nests' are of particular concern. Each year, at the tail end of the season, volunteers painstakingly scour the beach for any hatchlings that may have been disoriented by the lights and are straying towards the light and away from the water. Each year they rejoice over the successful release of several dozen 'wild' hatchlings, but also mourn unknown numbers of hatchlings that have emerged

from 'wild' nests and headed for the huge mast lights. Frustrated volunteers followed hatchling tracks that ended abruptly among dog or crow tracks or went right up to the tar roads and disappeared.

For years, SSTCN volunteers made representations to officials in the forest department and the Chennai Corporation. However, promises to change the direction of the lights or reduce their intensity or brightness never amounted to action. In the 2010 season, however, Mr. Sundararaju took charge as the Chief Wildlife Warden. He arranged a meeting with the Secretary for Environment and Forests, the Corporation Commissioner and a representative of the Fisheries Department. He gave SSTCN the opportunity to make a presentation highlighting the problems the olive ridley turtles face on this coast with particular emphasis on the damage caused by the bright mast lights.

Concerned by the situation, the Secretary, Mr. Sarangi, suggested that turtles also have a right to safely access the beach, and directed the Corporation Commissioner to arrange to switch off the lights with immediate effect as the hatchling season was already underway – a significant achievement and a real step in the right direction.



**Figure 1.** A mast light near Elliot's Beach switched off making the beach darker and safer for emerging hatchlings. Photo: SSTCN

However, by the time the 2011 season was upon us, both the Corporation Commissioner and the Secretary for Environment and Forests changed and there were real concerns about a consistency of approach with new officials in post. To our amazement and relief, within a week of delivering the usual letter of request to the Chief Wildlife Warden to switch off the mast lights, we were

informed that he had managed to get a Government Order passed stating that the mast lights on this stretch of beach from the Adyar estuary to Neelangarai covering the Elliot's, Thiruvanmiyur and Kottivakkam beaches, would be switched off from 11 pm till 5 am from January to April every year! Hopes are high that other stretches of the beach will follow suit.