

NGO Profile

Action for Protection of Wild Animals (APOWA):

Sea turtle conservation and habitat protection in the buffer zone of the Gahirmatha sea turtle rookery, Kendrapara, Orissa

Background

Over the years, olive ridley turtles have suffered along the Orissa coast due to several reasons. Apart from fishing related mortality, turtles face multifarious problems while they are in the coastal waters of Orissa. The threat of predation by feral and wild animals is a hindrance to the recruitment of offspring, and anthropogenic activities are harmful to the habitat and impact breeding of turtles. Sporadic nesting contributes equally to that of *arribadas* (mass nesting) and hence it is imperative that sporadic nests are offered equal protection. In the recent past, increased disposal of garbage has rendered these beaches unsuitable for nesting and there is now a need for consistent clean-up programmes to provide the olive ridley turtles a safe and clean nesting habitat. There is also a need to increase awareness among the communities living in these areas as they can contribute substantially to conservation of turtles that visit the Orissa coast.

APOWA (Action for Protection of Wild Animals) works towards saving, protecting and helping conserve endangered sea turtles and their habitats along the Orissa coast. Our programmes aim for the active participation of every seaside village along the coast. We endeavor to continue and strengthen these efforts.

The current activities of APOWA are carried out under a project that is being undertaken along the periphery and buffer zone of the Gahirmatha Wildlife Sanctuary, with the funding support of a Rapid Action Project of the Wildlife Trust of India. The project involves the monitoring of the nesting population as well as protection of nests. Sea turtle hatchlings, when they emerge, are offered protection from predators, and disoriented hatchlings are guided safely to the sea. Our

activities also include a public awareness component aimed for the residents of coastal villages and tourists. Awareness programmes are conducted by involving and mobilizing local people, especially members of fishing communities. Beach cleaning activities have also been conducted in specific sites. The project has received considerable assistance from local volunteers, members of local communities and school students, who are organized, trained and supervised by our experienced personnel.

Details of project activities:

Clean-up of nesting sites:

The cleaning of debris from sporadic nesting beaches is carried out to ensure sea turtles easier access to nesting sites and hatchlings easier access to the sea. Members of APOWA along with volunteers of other NGOs, local youth clubs, women's SHGs (Self Help Groups) and school students participated in the recent beach clean-up programme at Paradeep and at other places in a phase-wise manner. The field workers along with the local volunteers carried out the beach clean -up every afternoon for an hour at the project sites. Garbage on the beach, such as plastic, polythene bags, clothes and other debris were cleared from the beach for the safe nesting of turtles.

Monitoring and patrolling:

A large part of this project is devoted to direct protection of turtles and their nests. Volunteers from local coastal villages have been appointed as "turtle guides". They work round the clock for the protection of nests and turtles along the coast. They protect turtles and their nests from feral dogs, jackals, wild boars and other wild and domestic animals.

Rescue of disoriented hatchlings:

Hatchlings normally emerge after a period of about 45-55 days, depending upon the ambient sand temperature and climatic conditions. Artificial lighting and other factors disorient hatchlings, which then tend to move further inland from their nests, away from the sea. To prevent such disorientation, turtle guards and volunteers are trained to guide the hatchlings to the sea.

Awareness programmes:

Conservation of sea turtles is not possible without the help of local communities, fisherfolk and members of other communities that reside in these areas. We create awareness about sea turtle conservation among these communities regarding the detrimental impacts of mechanized trawlers and boats that endanger not just sea turtles but also threaten local artisanal fishing communities. Also, excess fishing by mechanized trawlers and boats significantly reduces fish stocks. While APOWA primarily tries to discourage the use of mechanized boats in these areas, we promote the use of Turtle Excluder Devices where mechanized boats are already in use. Members of local communities have also been sensitized to the need for maintaining a balance in the coastal and marine ecosystem. As part of awareness generation activities that extend beyond local communities, a large hoarding with relevant information has been installed for the benefit of visitors and tourists.

Future plans

The Rapid Action Project has achieved new heights and has helped in reaching all of APOWA's goals, none of which would have been possible without the support and assistance of the Wildlife Trust of India, and a fine team of

members and volunteers of APOWA. In keeping with our own recommendations for effective conservation of sea turtles, we would like to carry on the following activities in the coming months that will ensure the survival of the sea turtles along the Orissa coast.

Monitoring:

Proper monitoring of nesting sites will be carried out and monitoring units will be formed by involving greater participation of local communities, members of the youth, and others across nesting sites, especially outside of the protected area where turtles are more vulnerable to threats.

Awareness programmes:

Community involvement in conservation activities will be strengthened by increasing awareness amongst members of these communities. Awareness among the coastal community will help maintain habitats and will ensure survival of the species.

Beach cleaning:

Cleaning of beach debris on nesting beaches in highly sporadic nest pockets will be carried out before the next nesting season (December-January).

Hatcheries:

The use of hatcheries will contribute to the recruitment of sea turtles in Orissa. In addition, it will serve well as an educational tool to generate awareness among the local community and general public about the necessity for sea turtle conservation.

For more information on APOWA's activities, write to mail@apowa.org, or visit www.apowa.org. Contact APOWA at Hatapatana, P.O. Kadaliban, Kendrapara District, Orissa – 754222, India.

Contributor: Bijaya Kumar Kabi, Honorary Director, APOWA