

# INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS ON SEA TURTLES FROM THE CHENNAI COAST OF INDIA IN 2016

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## STRANDINGS

This season (January to April 2016) was marked by the stranding of juvenile turtles of sizes that are uncommon along the coast of Chennai, India. Two olive ridley, one green, and one hawksbill turtle (Table 1) were observed stranded between the months of February and May in the 7km stretch of beach from Neelankarai to the Adyar River estuary that is patrolled daily during the nesting season. Three of the four stranded turtles were dead when found. The olive ridley turtle found on 27 February 2016 was barely alive and coated with a greasy material. The turtle was taken to the TREE Foundation rescue centre at Neelangarai, Chennai, for treatment, where it later died despite efforts to resuscitate it. The green turtle found on 17 May 2016 was observed by one of the authors during a casual walk on the beach after the nesting season had ended. There is limited information available about the juvenile life stage of olive ridley turtles as they are completely oceanic (Bolten, 2002), therefore these observations generated much interest. In the last decade, there have been several reports in the local media and anecdotal observations of juvenile olive ridley, hawksbill and green turtles being stranded and entangled in fishing nets (Nina Simon, 2010; Frederick, 2011; Special Correspondent, 2011; Oppili, 2015; Special Correspondent, 2016). However, there are no detailed reports on the size of these turtles and, therefore, the term juvenile could have been inappropriately applied.

### *Pseudonesting*

During an organized public walk on 26 March 2016, an olive ridley turtle (CCL- 63cm, CCW- 62cm) was

observed making a body pit, digging a nest cavity, and camouflaging the site. Care was taken to not disturb the turtle during the entire duration of the nesting process. Once the turtle returned to the sea, the volunteers probed the sand to relocate the nest to a hatchery. However, only a well-formed nest chamber was observed with no eggs. The entire camouflaged area was dug up and searched thoroughly for two hours. It was then concluded that it was a pseudonesting event. This was the first observation of such a phenomenon in Chennai, although Swaminathan & John (2011) have reported similar behaviour in olive ridley turtles at Rushikulya, Orissa. Such behaviour is not uncommon in primigravid turtles (those laying their first clutch) and may be due to limited oviductal responsiveness to hormonal stimuli and/or motility at the first nesting attempt (Phillott, pers.comm.).

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**Table 1. Details of the four stranded juvenile turtles found on the Chennai coast Jan-May 2016**

Turtle	Curved Carapace Length (cm)	Curved Carapace Width (cm)	Date	Comments
Hawksbill	26	24	18 <sup>th</sup> Jan 2016	Found dead
Olive ridley	18	17	15 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2016	Found dead
Olive ridley	17	16	27 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2016	Found alive
Green	36	35	17 <sup>th</sup> May 2016	Found dead

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## SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION AND ALLIED ACTIVITIES WITH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AT VELAS, MAHARASHTRA, INDIA

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### INTRODUCTION

Velas (17.9588°N, 73.0361°E) is a tiny hamlet in the Mandangad taluka, Ratnagiri District of Maharashtra, India. Velas has an isolated 3km stretch of coast-line dotted by *Casuarina* trees facing the Arabian Sea. A small stream passes through the village to the beach surrounded by dense mangroves which flood in the rainy season.

The secluded, wide beach with offshore sand bars is suitable for olive ridley turtle nesting. The sea turtle breeding and nesting season in Maharashtra lasts from November to April. In Velas, nesting usually occurs from December to the first week of April and accounts for 40% of the nesting in Maharashtra.

### SNM AND THE TURTLE FESTIVAL

Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra (SNM), a non-governmental organization, initiated marine turtle conservation along the coast of Maharashtra with the involvement of the local community. Its first onsite olive ridley conservation efforts were carried out in 2002 at Velas (Katdare & Mone, 2003) and now encompasses 36 beaches and 12 villages of Ratnagiri district.

The Turtle Festival was first organised by SNM in 2006 and has occurred every year since then. Local

villagers joined the initiative in 2006 which led to the formation of Kasav Mitra Mandal (KMM), a local club of individuals supporting the conservation in Velas. At present, the local governing body i.e. the Grampanchayat along with KMM the Forest Department, Joint Forest Management Committee (JFM) and Biodiversity Management Committee (BMC) work together for the conservation programme “The Turtle Festival”.

The members of KMM provide homestay arrangements for visitors to the Turtle Festival. Nineteen families initially extended their traditional hospitality wherein they serve home-cooked Maharashtrian style food to the visiting tourists. However, the number has increased to 31 in recent times and the number is expected to increase to 34 in the next year or so. Members of the KMM contribute 10% of the total income to the SNM turtle conservation programme.

One of the major fundamental activities during the Turtle Festival is to check the local hatchery and release emerged hatchlings into the sea. The volunteers of KMM check for hatchlings at 7am and 6pm and new hatchlings are released for tourists to observe. Other activities KMM hosts during the festival are visits to a variety of birdwatching sites in and around Velas via a bullock cart safari. They also project a screening on turtle conservation during the festival followed