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## DIARY OF THE SSTCN CHENNAI TURTLE SEASON JANUARY – APRIL 2016

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### INTRODUCTION

As the Student Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN) looks back at the season just gone by in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, the primary feeling is that it was a muted one and also shorter as it ended a couple of weeks earlier than usual. In comparison, the last few years had been big, both in terms of the number of nests and in the number of dead turtles encountered! In one of our early walks this season, a fisherman told us that they were spotting many dead turtles in the sea and it would not be long before these washed ashore. We counted more than 300 stranded and dead turtles in the 2015 season and hoped not to experience another such year. Fortunately, we encountered only 85 dead adult turtles this season. While it is still a big number, it was only a third of the number of dead turtles found in the last few years. However, we also found far fewer nests, suggesting fewer nesting olive ridley turtles than in 2015.

### Number of nests

We have been averaging around 100 nests per season in our southern stretch of beach, extending from Neelangarai to the Adyar River, close to the Besant Nagar beach. This year we found only 51 nests on this stretch.

In our northern stretch of beach extending from Adyar River Creek to the Cooum River, popularly referred as the Marina Beach, we found around 110 nests where we usually find between 150 and 180. In all, we ended the season with 175 nests, 75 fewer than last year and 73 less than 2014. All the nests were relocated, 101 into the two SSTCN hatcheries and 74 to the Forest Department hatchery. The two SSTCN hatcheries are set up on either side of the Adyar estuary, one to cover Besant Nagar stretch and the other to cover the Marina beach. The Forest Department hatchery was set up about 50 meters from the SSTCN hatchery on the Besant Nagar side.

### Working with the Forest Department

The Forest Department and SSTCN have been co-patrolling these beaches for the past two years. We tried patrolling at different hours of the night to maximise nest collection last year, but that resulted in confusion between the two organisations. This year we divided the northern stretch into two parts and each did one stretch with the other providing back up support when required. This arrangement worked better as there was no confusion or overlap in terms of time. The Forest Department hatchery was built close to ours so that volunteers and care takers could monitor

and care for nests relocated into both structures.

### **New walk timings**

Over the last twenty years we have been delaying the time of our patrols to later and later in the night. This year we started patrols of both the northern and southern stretches around 3am. As Marina Beach is relatively short in length, the volunteers walked back and forth to cover the stretch more than once each night. Besant Nagar is a longer beach, so leaving at 3am just about gave enough time to cover the stretch and finish by day break, especially on nights with multiple nests.

### **Turtle walks with the public**

SSTCN turtle walks have become one of the star attractions of Chennai. As the walks are mentioned on Trip Advisor there is always interest throughout the year. During the turtle nesting season, we struggle to maintain the crowds to a manageable number (between 50 and 75 people). SSTCN decided some years ago to focus on walks for students of schools and colleges and individuals and families, but not corporate groups.

Despite having a registration procedure through email, people often join the walks without registering and at any time. We feel that people's sense of entitlement has increased over the years, with some turning aggressive when they are denied a place on the walk, and are looking for a way to resolve this. However, we had some very good pre-walk discussions this year, often stretching from 11.30 to 1.30 am or even 2 am before the walk commenced. For the past few years we have been briefing the groups in both Tamil and English. When school groups come we brief them separately. On such days we have three different groups being briefed; groups are divided according to age and language as some prefer Tamil and some are English speakers. Attitudes, questions and interests often differ between these groups. The talks were anchored primarily by Arun V, Harish N.V. and Akila Balu. This year they drew a lot of inspiration for the talks from the book "Hope Beneath Our Feet", edited by Martin Keogh, a compilation of environmental articles by practising environmentalists and ecologists.

### **At the hatchery**

Similar to the public walks, the hatchery too draws hundreds of visitors - mostly families with young children. Shraavan Krishnan, a long term volunteer, has ably anchored this activity for many years now. School groups and families visit the hatchery in the evenings during the turtle hatching months between

March and early May and volunteers like Shraavan interact with the crowds. They then watch hatchlings being released on the beach and entering the sea.

The hatchery is monitored around the clock to check for emerging hatchlings by a group of young volunteers. Our hatchery management has steadily improved with many volunteers feeling responsible. For example, this season we had an enthusiastic volunteer Ghesna Rao who could be depended on to be at the hatchery every evening to release hatchlings, excavate nests and record relevant data. She will be sorely missed in the coming season as she has gone to Mumbai for higher studies.

We had a low hatching success this year compared to other years, with poor hatching success in the first few nests and later nests potentially impacted by the high heat and low rain this summer. We ended the season with 8,907 hatchlings (8,741 from nests in the hatchery and 166 from nests on the beach) from 101 nests (excluding 75 nests from the Forest Department hatchery) with an overall emergence success rate of 78.9%.

### **Our community partners**

One of the most pleasant memories of this season is our partnership with the Chennai Trekking Club (CTC). It started with a conversation with the founder Peter Van Giet when we told them that turtle walking was a very lonely activity with only two people walking together on most nights. He promised help, and Vinodh Sundar a CTC member, patiently coordinated CTC trekkers to join us almost every week night.

This year the beaches of Chennai were unbelievably filthy, with tons of garbage washed ashore after the Chennai floods so there was virtually no place for the turtles to nest. CTC organized clean ups, (including one as we built the hatchery) every weekend for several weeks before the beaches became nesting friendly again.

### **The court case against the fisheries department**

Last year, a judge in the Madras High Court filed a *suo moto* case against the Fisheries Department after seeing a report in the Times of India about the large number of dead turtles that season. Stake-holders involved in sea turtle conservation, including the Fisheries Department, Forestry Department and NGO's, were asked to prepare an SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) and implement it to ensure a reduction in the number of turtles drowning in fishing nets. Wildlife film maker Shekar Dattatri was appointed to independently audit the preparation and implementation

of the SOP of the Fisheries Department and his report was submitted to the court in July 2016. After holding a stakeholders' meeting, a compliance report was submitted by the Fisheries Department to the Hon'ble High Court of Madras on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2016.

A Government Order was passed on September 27<sup>th</sup> 2016 prohibiting mechanised boats from entering within 5 nautical miles of the shore during sea turtle migrating and nesting season from January up to April. The GO had major deficiencies: it included country craft in the 5 nautical miles ban which will greatly affect artisanal fishermen; it stated that the seasonal ban should be between January and April whereas it should actually be from November to March so as to include turtle migrating months; and it omitted skate/ray nets which cause high turtle mortality, from the ban. Requests were made by SSTCN and members of Dakshin as well as Tree Foundation to make corrections in the GO. It is hoped that these changes will be effected.

Turtle conservationists have also taken the discussion to the public by writing in newspapers both in English and Tamil.

## SUMMARY

Overall, we feel it was a positive season though a muted one. Many new volunteers joined us. People are much more aware of environmental issues as reflected in the deep conversations we had with them.

Our relationship with the fishing community members too has grown over the years. They have respect for our commitment and extend support in many ways. This year saw even greater participation from the fishing community members. However, we run the risk of losing this long-cultivated relationship due to the verdict in the court case due to our portrayal as the ones opposing fishing in coastal waters. This is unfortunate, as we have always been supportive of traditional fishing. Currently we are waiting for a revision of the order which will allow small scale traditional fishermen to continue fishing in near-shore waters, as it is difficult to imagine turtle conservation without their participation.

We are also excited by the upcoming Cetacean study where we are planning to collect data and tissue samples of stranded marine mammals. This study is being done under the guidance of Dipani Sutaria and Rahul Muralidharan.