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RESOURCE OF INTEREST

REVIEW OF: 'FROM SOUP TO SUPERSTAR. THE STORY OF SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION ALONG THE INDIAN COAST' BY KARTIK SHANKER

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This book is a captivating compendium of sea turtle conservation that extends well beyond India's borders. It covers "three eras of sea turtle conservation": pre-Independence; the period between Independence and the 1970s; and the period between the 1970s and today (p. 9). Shanker offers meticulous accounts of seemingly every important turtle-related event. He harkens back to the yesteryear of sea turtle conservation, but also provides insights into how large international organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International

Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) end up playing significant and sometimes misplaced roles in conservation. The book explores relationships between the conservation of crocodiles, sea turtles, and dugongs in India. Along the same lines, it recalls relationships between the conservation of charismatic species, and manoeuvring of charismatic politicians (e.g. Indira Gandhi, p. 76-77). Through precisely referenced stories, Shanker offers rich descriptions of conservation on the ground, while linking these to greater themes. He reveals relationships through which particular actions, actors, media campaigns, science programs, and management acts are tied to larger shifts in how we understand and value sea turtles. We are called to acknowledge the tangled webs between conservation and colonialism (past and present). For example, Shanker notes that India's history of turtle meat consumption is largely owed to the British (p. 79). He also describes different cultural and religious understandings and uses of sea turtles in India—calling attention to the country's heterogeneous population and its diverse geographies. We learn that some communities do eat sea turtle products

but members of other groups observe cultural taboos against their consumption (e.g. some people believe them to be incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu) (p. 43).

Among the most intriguing stories are those of fieldwork under “extremely taxing conditions”, such as having to travel great distances with limited supplies, and to work long, hard, hours, with little support or relief (p. 100). I gained a new and deepened respect for such contributions after reading details. I also learned that there is a “CIFT-TED” (p. 121-124)-an “adapted in India” TED or turtle excluder device, proposed for use in trawling, to reduce harmful impacts on sea turtles.

The book references the work of many others to raise questions about common conservation practices or discourses vs. strategies that might work better for most of the parties involved. It includes powerful stories of conservation mishaps, mistakes, and failures, such as examples of both successful and unsuccessful engagement with local fishers. Shanker draws upon years of observation of fishing, laws, enforcement, and sea turtles in India to make some interesting statements about their interactions. For example, on p. 143, he argues that better enforcement of fisheries laws would have better protected both sea turtles and fisher livelihoods. In highlighting fisheries-related conservation failures, he challenges oversimplified portrayals of fishers as being some combination of: ignorant, uneducated, confused, and rebellious. Considering international influences, Shanker details various international letter writing campaigns, petitions, and pressures, offering judgements on which were most appropriate and/or effective.

This is part of the well-argued commentary on the evolution of the politics of sea turtle conservation in India. Shanker notes the long-lasting effects that “one time” events can have on conservation (e.g. a powerful cyclone in 1999; the Tsunami of 2005). He tells stories of key eras and events in Indian sea turtle conservation (e.g. conflicts over various ports and protected areas; battles over trawling and reducing its negative impacts). Such stories are also linked to several persistent debates reflected in academic writings, practitioner practice, and media treatment of the complicated relationships between humans and sea turtles. Shanker includes insightful examples of the ‘conservation vs. preservation’ debate, for example, by comparing stories of places that have experimented with sustainable use practices, vs. those that have imposed outright bans (e.g. p. 102-109). He discusses the implementations of such actions, traces their origins, and contemplates their successes and failures. Questions about success, he notes, are greatly influenced by who is asking, how

they are measuring, their conceptualization of success, and expected implications. Rather than including an explicit stance on the use of sea turtle products, Shanker calls for careful and respectful attention to contexts and cultures of influence, science, and local livelihoods.

This book is not simply descriptive; Shanker offers his own analysis of how turtles have moved “from soup to superstars”. He shares, for example, many stories of Greenpeace’s presence and actions on sea turtles in India—they are a fascinating set of tales, with mixed outcomes. He also draws attention to organizations he has been involved with or otherwise worked with such as the Martine Turtle Specialist Group of the IUCN, and suggests that some cases would have best been left in Indian hands. Further, he cautions that tales of extinction, disappearances, and species at risk are sometimes more hyperbole or hype, than proven facts backed up by good science. This complicates determining true conservation needs and best courses of action, especially with respect to local livelihoods and support for interventions.

I was dazzled by Shanker’s account of the rise of sea turtle conservation in India, but I also wondered about intended audiences for this book... This volume would be an excellent (if not slightly overwhelming) primer on: sea turtle conservation in India; greater shifts in interactions with international conservation; and/or a ‘family tree’ of individuals, labs, organizations, and their legacies in understanding sea turtle populations and conservation projects associated with India. It could also serve as a good complementary text for a university course on the social science of conservation - for readers looking to trace the evolution of conservation beliefs and practices over time, using a case study. Lastly, it would be a great addition to professional or personal libraries of all those interested in the history of sea turtle conservation, and important sites and struggles within it.

The main weakness of the book is also one of its strengths: the level of detail. While some details are quite fascinating, particularly with respect to the influence of particular individuals on conservation, I did wonder how many readers would have patience for such details. At the same time, learning about a central “conservation character’s” favourite sandwich or particularly harrowing field season helps to humanize conservation, and reminds us of hard work and key contributions.

Despite its over-attention to detail, this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on sea turtle conservation. It is an accessible survey of the history of sea turtle conservation, with India as a focal point. It is an impressive feat to write a book that bridges the

macro and the micro. The book is peppered with sea turtle conservation trivia, but facts are skilfully woven together with (mostly) elegant prose that draws together science, history, and human passions for improving our world. Alongside emphasizing successes and challenges in sea turtle conservation in India and abroad, it contains critical reminders of work that remains to be done. The book closes the way it begins, with sincere recognition of the hard work done by pioneers such as Satish Bhaskar, Ravi Sankaran, and Manish Chandi—those who braved difficult conditions, “paving the way for future generations for ecologists to seek answers...”. The passion that Shanker shares with many of those profiled in the book is reflected here: “Today, biologists study various aspects of

sea turtle biology including nesting biology, physiology, migration, genetics, evolutionary biology, ecology, and so on... So much has been done and yet so little is known. It is this that makes them not only fascinating to study, but also difficult subjects for conservation” (p. 34-35). To this end, Shanker asserts that we should all endeavour to remove our species-specific conservation blinders: “The onus is on environmental conservationists to carefully choose and implement approaches that have the best consequences not just for individual species but for ecosystems and diversity in the long run. Conservationists must seek not single-point-single-species successes, but success across geographical regions, over time and for many taxonomic groups” (p. 108). Hear hear!