INCIDENTAL CAPTURE OF LEATHERBACK SEA TURTLE OFF BHARADKHOL, MAHARASHTRA, INDIA

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Maharashtra has a 720km long coastline which harbors a rich marine biodiversity, including the five species of sea turtles known to inhabit the coastal waters of India (Hatkar et al., 2019). However, leatherback turtles (Dermochelys coriacea) have rarely been reported and lack photographic evidence to validate presence of the species. The leatherback turtle is listed as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Wallace et al., 2013) and is a Schedule-1 species protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WPA, 1972) of India. The leatherback turtle is locally known as 'Kurma' in Maharashtra (Sanaye & Pawar, 2009). It is highly migratory, spends most of its life offshore, and feeds on scyphozoans (Dodge et al., 2011). Within the wider region, leatherback sea turtles nest at Bird’s Head Peninsula, West Papua (Indonesia), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (India), Godavaya (Sri Lanka) and KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) (Shanker, 2004).

Very little information is available about the occurrence of the leatherback turtle on the west coast of India. Ten to fifteen years ago, two nests of leatherback turtles were recorded each in Sindhudurg and Raigad districts in the state of Maharashtra (Giri, 2001). However, no authenticated record of the nesting was available. A stranding of a leatherback turtle was recorded from the beach of Devbag, Maharashtra, in 1985 (Karbhari, 1985) but again no photographic record was available of the event. A leatherback turtle (no photos for validation but morphometric measurements support the species identification) was entangled in a gill net off Vizhinjam, Kerala, in 2008 and was released back to the sea (Anil et al., 2009). The Mangrove Cell (Maharashtra Forest Department)
and the Fisheries Department of Maharashtra started a compensation scheme in December 2018, under which fishers who cut or otherwise damage their fishing gear to release a marine animal protected under WPA 1972 were given monetary compensation. Several awareness and outreach workshops were carried out in the coastal districts of Maharashtra by the Mangrove Cell to popularise the said scheme and to build a network of fishers to collect secondary data of endangered marine animals. Subsequently, this record of a leatherback sea turtle was shared by a fisher based in Bharadkhol (18.15° N, 72.83° E), a small coastal village in the Raigad district. The turtle was caught in a gill net on 25th May 2018 and was released back to the sea safely by fishers cutting the net. This is the first photographic record (Figure 1) of a leatherback sea turtle from Maharashtra. Using ImageJ software, the estimated length of the turtle was ~1.2m.

More needs to be known about the occurrence of leatherback sea turtles off the Maharashtra coastline, and could be gathered from similar reports from fishers or a research study.

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SILKY SHARK FEEDING ON A JUVENILE GREEN TURTLE IN OFFSHORE WATERS OF PAKISTAN, NORTHERN ARABIAN SEA

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Turtles play an important role in coastal and offshore ecosystems as they feed on organisms such as jellyfish, crustaceans, mollusks, and seaweed (Bjorndal, 1997). They, on the other hand, are preyed upon by a number of animals and form an important part of their diet (Hirth, 1971; Stancyk, 1981; Witzell, 1987). Sharks are among the major predators of sea turtles (Cabrera-Chavez-Costa et al., 2010; Hammerschlag et al., 2015; Estupiñán-Montaño et al., 2018). For example, Heithaus (2001) and Simpfendorfer et al. (2001) found that turtles are an important component in the diet of tiger sharks (Galeocerdo cuvier). However, less information has been published on the diet or feeding habits of the silky shark (Carcharius falciformis). Cabrera-Chavez-Costa et al. (2010) reported that silky sharks in the Gulf of Mexico (Atlantic Ocean) mainly preyed on teleost fish and in the Gulf of Tehuantepec (Pacific Ocean) on the crab Portunus xanthusii affinis. Galvan et al. (1989)

Literature cited:


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