

IN MEMORIAM



SATISH BHASKAR: 11TH SEPTEMBER 1946 TO 22ND MARCH 2023

TURTLE WALKER EXTRAORDINAIRE

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In the early 1970s the Madras Snake Park, located very close to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), was a magnet for a certain breed of student who just couldn't bear the drudgery of a college education. Since I was of the same non-academic ilk, I encouraged them to hang out with us and help develop the Snake Park's field activities of conservation and research. One of these stalwarts was Satish Bhaskar, a quietly intense young man from IIT, whose passion was jogging several kilometres each morning to Elliot's Beach to have a swim in the ocean.

We had recently started nocturnal beach walks to find ridley sea turtle nests before the poachers got them and rebury them in a safe hatchery we set had up at the Cholamandal Artists' Colony. Satish got into this routine with zest and his strength was a welcome addition when we had to carry heavy bags of eggs back to the hatchery. The rest of us at the Snake Park were hung up on snakes and crocodiles and it was Satish's dedicated single-mindedness that made me suggest to him that India needs a Mr Sea Turtle and he would be the ideal man for the job.

He obviously took this idea to heart and, starting with the meagre resources the Snake Park provided him, he began his sea turtle surveys. His intrepid trips covering both the beaches of mainland India and eventually the Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar Islands were made possible by the World Wildlife Fund and other donors and resulted in close to 50 reports, notes and papers. But it was his entertaining letters that grabbed us the most. Writing from the Nicobar Islands he described the torture of sand flies during the day and by mosquitoes at night. One night on a remote Nicobar beach he bedded down on the mat with mosquito net stitched to it (an invention we made). Very early next morning he was awakened by a shuffling sound and he opened one eye to watch a saltwater crocodile walk past him and slide into the surf ten meters away. Surveying



those beaches, he had to swim across frequent small estuaries, always keeping an eye out for crocodiles. In a remarkable 9-month trip in 1979, he covered almost all the islands in the archipelago and then returned several times in the 1980s to visit the others.

After his first trip to the Lakshadweep in 1977, he told us that he would love to stay and study the green sea turtle nesting beach on Suhelipara, one of the uninhabited islands. He said the only problem was that they nested during the monsoon and there was no boat traffic then as the seas were too rough. "I'll have to maroon myself on the island for the whole monsoon" he said with a smile. We started going over all the things that could go wrong, anything from a bad toothache to malaria or an upset tummy could put a real damper on this idea, but he was adamant and did maroon himself on the island between June and September 1982. Famously, his letter in a bottle floated to Sri Lanka and reached his wife just 24 days after he had thrown it into the surf at the edge of the lagoon. The boat that was due to pick him was just 1 month late!! But not much fazed Satish in the field.

Satish really kick-started interest in sea turtle conservation in India and I'm proud that I had a role in it.