

GAHIRMATHA AGAIN ABUZZ WITH NESTING OLIVE RIDLEYS....after an uneasy lapse of two years

Background

The herpetologists world over were deeply worried over the discontinuance of the Arribada (mass nesting in Spanish) at Gahirmatha in Orissa coast,India, long well known as the world's largest rookery of Olive Ridleys. The various surveys had ascribed this unhappy interlude to the mass killing of turtles, as caused by the reckless and illegal trawling and fishing in the in-shore waters of the turtle-sensitive beaches .

This year too thousands of dead Olive Ridleys were washed ashore leading the people to lose all hope on the possible occurrence of mass nesting.

The 19th Annual Sea Turtle Symposium which was held at South Padre Island, Texas, USA had focused this problem through lectures, poster sessions and special launch-time workshop with active participation by Indian delegates Mr.Bivas Pandav, Dr.B.C.Choudhury, Dr.P.Mohanty-Hejmadi and Mr.Chitta Behera . Moreover, the Symposium also passed a Resolution on 'Checking the fishing related mass mortality of Olive ridley turtles in Orissa coast, India.'

However defying all human anxieties, the Olive Ridleys emerged in thousands and thousands, especially in islands located in Gahirmatha region to perform the much awaited Arribada during March-April '99.

PENTHA (Barunei mouth)

The first arrivals were at Penth beach in Barunei mouth lasting for three days only as per the following tentative day-wise figures of nesting turtles.

12th March '99 - 4000

13th March '99 - 2000

14th March '99 - 2000 TOTAL : 8000

Nasi I & Nasi II (Dhamra mouth)

The following are the tentatively estimated date-wise figures of mass nesting in two islands now called Nasi-1 and Nasi-2 . These two islands are located adjacent to each other and the arribada took place in both almost coincidentally and in more or less equal magnitude. The following are the tentative day-wise consolidated figures for both islands :

24th March '99- 70000

25th March '99- 50000

26th March '99- 35000

27th March '99- 25000

28th March '99- 20000

29th March '99- 15000

30th March '99- 15000

31th March '99- 15000

1st April '99 - 9000

2nd April '99 - 8000

3rd April '99 - 5000

4th April '99 - 1000

5th April '99 - 460 TOTAL : 268460

Pentha-II

Everybody thought that after the unexpected mass nesting at Nasi I & Nasi II , this was all that Gahirmatha had in terms of nesting turtles in 1999.

But lo ! all of a sudden as many as 21000 and odd nesting Ridleys arrived on the nights of 21 and 22 April at an altogether new island at Gahirmatha region located between Pentha and Barunei mouth, about 27 kms south of Gahirmatha, which we may now call Pentha-II for the sake of convenience.

No room for Complacency

The happy news of occurrence of Arribada at Gahirmatha however need not push us into a state of complacency . We should keep in mind :

Turtle ExcluderDevice (TED) is not yet operationalised in Orissa coast.

The discontinuance of Arribada at Rishikulya mouth, the next largest rookery of Olive Ridley after Gahirmatha.

Except Gahirmatha other turtle rookeries like Devi river mouth, Chandrabagha mouth , Mahanadi mouth and Rushikulya mouth do not enjoy any protection.

No involvement of trawling and fishermen communities in the turtle protection planning and programmes. As a result the Trawlers Associations have come out into the open against the bans and prohibitions on fishing promulgated by the government.

No mechanism exists to enumerate the nesting population . The above quoted figures are therefore highly tentative. But paradoxical as it may sound, the above figures are much less than the actual numbers.

There are many new and peculiar features of this year's arribada at Gahirmatha, which along with the manifold problems that beset the sea turtles in the Indian subcontinent need be addressed to by the interested participants of the forthcoming 2nd ASEAN SEA TURTLE SYMPOSIUM AND WORKSHOP scheduled for 15-17 July 1999 at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

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