

Home Again

I was glad to be back. When you are a young turtle, swimming a few thousand kilometres of the open sea can be a wee bit tiring! It's not only the distance, but the many dangers that my friends and I had to face on the way. Those nasty nets of the big fishing ships, which drag up everything they encounter in the ocean, the murderous propellers of motorboats, and even the occasional killer whale though, I must say, they usually leave us alone. They probably don't like our tough carapace irritating their stomachs! Oh, sorry, sometimes we use this turtle-talk which you humans may not understand... the 'carapace' is that hard part of my back that you sometimes call a shell.

But as I was saying, I was glad to be back. I cannot quite remember when we left this lovely beach, it was so long ago, maybe 25-30 years, and I was just about born! All I can recollect is that I was there with a few dozen brothers and sisters, under the night sky lit by the stars and a half-moon. We all had an irresistible urge to waddle towards a massive shiny dark stretch on the horizon. It was the sea, at that time gently lapping against the beach where I was born.

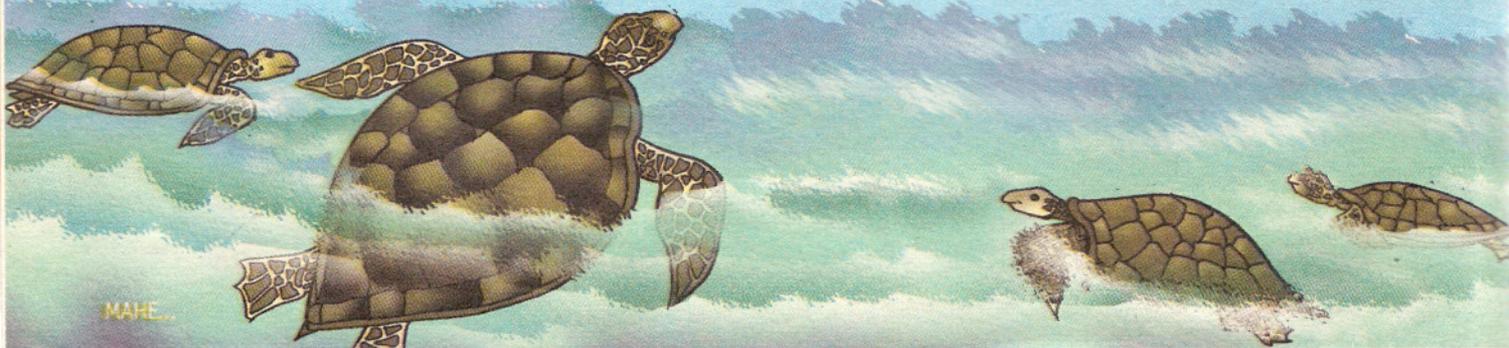
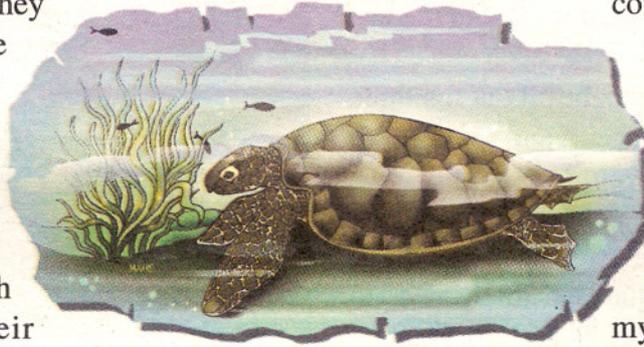
I was apparently one of several dozen babies to emerge from the nest that my mother had made on this beach. No, not a bird-like nest...it was just a deep hole dug into the beach sand, into which the Mommy turtles dropped their eggs. And I still don't believe what one of my aunts (more than double my age, so

she sure knew a lot more!) told me...that I actually emerged from one such egg, and dug my own way out of two feet of sand! Sadly, I do not know anything about my mother, but this aunt said that mother turtles leave the beach immediately after laying the eggs and covering the holes again with sand. It was this aunt who gave me my somewhat tongue-twisting name, Ulrid...

There's actually no end to the unbelievable things that she has whispered into my ear, during our long long journey. Listen to this one: when I was born, I was apparently so small I could fit into the palm of your just-born brother or sister...and now, I'm as big as one of your school desks. Three feet across from one tip of my carapace to the other...and weighing 60 kilos!

But my favourite story is the one about my human saviours. My birthplace is what you call Goa. It seems that around the time I was born, turtles were hunted by some humans for their flesh (Yech! How could anyone find us tasty?) and even our eggs were stolen for food! But there were these kind humans, too, who could not bear to see this happen.

My aunt tells me that one such group of people actually combed the beach for turtle nesting holes. Whenever they located one, they would carefully remove the eggs, and take them to a safe place near their houses. These shelters for the eggs are usually fenced off for protection. Here, they would bury the



eggs and wait for them to hatch.

Guess what: I was one of these “rescued” eggs! So, if it had not been for these kind people, I’d probably have ended up as turtle egg soup in one of your restaurants!



net. The rest of us had surrounded her, helpless to do anything, while she struggled...for almost an hour, she tried to bite her way to freedom. Unable to get to the surface to breathe, she finally died, and I can't forget her last

look at me. It was full of sadness, but also a defiant encouragement...she seemed to be telling me, 'I can't make it, but you must.'

And now I was back on the beach of my birth. I had been very far away, out in the Indian Ocean beyond what you call Sri Lanka. We had all swum off to those waters immediately after being born, to grow up and to learn the ways of life. Soon, though, we got the urge to come back, joining the mass of aunts, sisters, and cousins all of whom are heading back to their birthplace.

I did. And not too soon. My stomach was bursting, I was dying to get away from my friends and find a spot to dig. Why? Oh, didn't I tell you? I now had my own eggs in my belly, and I was all ready to lay them! I hope you'll join our human friends in Goa, to protect my babies!

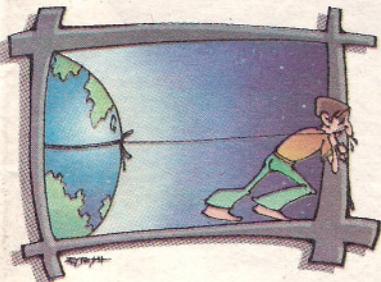
- by Ashish Kothari

Courtesy: *The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) and Kalpavriksh*

As soon as I landed, I was surrounded by a few of my friends who had arrived a little earlier. They gave me the most welcome news I'd heard in months. The entire beach, it seems, had been declared protected for our species, the Olive ridley turtle. It was jointly patrolled by the fisherfolk and wildlife officials. No longer was there the danger of someone killing us or stealing our eggs.

There are five kinds of sea turtles that come to the Indian coast, migrating thousands of kilometres to come and nest. They are the Olive ridley, the Leatherback, the Green sea, the Loggerhead, and the Hawksbill turtles. The Leatherback is the biggest, its carapace upto 6 feet long and its weight upto 500 kg! It can migrate several thousand kilometres! On some beaches in Orissa, there can be mass nesting by half a million Olive ridleys ...one of the greatest spectacles of nature. It is illegal to hunt sea turtles anywhere in India's marine and coastal areas.

Even as I rejoiced to hear this, a tinge of sadness came over me, and anger at the ways in which humans can sometimes hurt us. I remembered my close friend Ulvia, and the excitement with which we had started off on this journey back to our birthplace. We had pestered our aunts to tell us how we would find our way there, and they simply said, follow your senses. We did, and it brought me back. Not, however, Ulvia. Half-way across the seas, she was caught in a trawler



When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.

- John Muir

Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.

- Mahatma Gandhi

