

Who will save the turtles?

A personal crusade to save the turtles of Goa has become a community effort.

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We had just arrived in Morjim when two members of the Green Cross Society, Goa, rushed in, saying, "Some hatchlings are coming out!" We dumped the luggage on the floor, placed half-finished glasses of water on the table and ran out. Running on the sand, with stiff, cramped muscles after our long journey was difficult, but all aches and pains were forgotten when we saw the tiny turtle hatchlings slowly emerging, from a largish depression in the sand. Now, after months of careful effort, the local volunteers, many of them hard bitten fishermen, seemed almost maternal as they surrounded the nest, picking up the hatchlings as they emerged and then carrying them to the sea in a bucket of water... literally speeding them on their journey to adulthood.

We were extremely lucky to see the hatchlings. Though Morjim is a designated and protected habitat for the Olive Ridley turtle, the instances of turtle nesting have dropped sharply over the last few years. In India, the Olive Ridley turtle nests on both the Eastern and Western coasts and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The females come ashore to nest, mostly at night, crawling above the high water mark, and then digging out a nest with their hind flippers. They lay 100-150 eggs and return immediately to the sea, while the eggs usually hatch in 50-60 days. Though Olive Ridley turtles are the most numerous marine turtles in the world, large numbers are killed in trawler nets and by poaching, so they have been put on the list of endangered animals. In the past, turtles nested on nearly all the beaches in Goa. Due to greater tourist activity on many beaches like Calangute, and Colva, five star hotels and resorts, making it difficult for the turtles to nest, have replaced sand dunes. However in Morjim local people have formed groups, fighting for turtle conservation. Initially the villagers used to poach the turtle eggs either to eat or to sell, but after a local resident, Capt. Gerard Fernandes, intervened and explained the importance of leaving the nests alone, the tide slowly turned in favour of the turtle.

Apart from talking to the villagers, Capt Fernandes also put in money from his personal savings to give awards to individuals who reported turtle nesting sites. The villagers realised that turtle conservation also helped them to attract tourists to their beach, especially since the turtle nesting season, (October to March) coincides exactly with the peak tourist season in Goa. Eco-tourism is a fast growing segment of the tourism industry, because more and more people are visiting sanctuaries and other such areas, which allow people a peek into the natural world. Watching a tiny turtle hatchling emerge sure beats sauntering along window-shopping on the main road in Panjim.

In Morjim, the villagers set up temporary shacks on the beach, offering solitude, good food and occasional glimpses of turtles to the eager nature lover. When turtle eggs are about to hatch, a characteristic depression appears in the sand and the shack owners alert both the tourists and the concerned government authorities (the Forest Department). They are particular about keeping their beaches clean since dirt or refuse would attract stray dogs and crows, both natural predators of turtle hatchlings. No loud music or bright lights are allowed on the beach either, as these would disturb the nesting turtles.

This conservation effort worked very well for over five years, with both the villagers and the tourists benefiting. However, recent developments have shown that there have been attempts to exploit the concept of ecotourism, with businessmen building permanent restaurants and hotels close to the beach, supposedly offering people an "eco-holiday". This is self-defeating, since there has already been a drop in turtle nesting and big buildings will ultimately lead to the destruction of the nesting habitat. However Capt. Fernandes says that their group will continue to resist such "development" and hopes to continue their fight for turtle conservation.

We can only hope, for the sake of the Olive Ridley turtles, that right is might and that the just will win this particular war.

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Things you can do

"Take only photographs and leave only footprints".

Some of you may have read this maxim in tourist offices or in rest houses... and not realised its significance.

Whenever you visit coastal places with beautiful beaches, remember not to litter. Plastic bags, leftover food, or glass bottles will make life difficult for all the creatures which feed, nest at the waterline — turtles, crabs, sandpipers.

However tempting it is do avoid playing loud music on beaches or in protected areas or sanctuaries.

We are there as guests... let's try not to behave like boorish invaders.

And, maybe when you are next planning a holiday at a resort, which claims that, "it is only 50m from the waterline," it might be a good idea to remember that then it is probably violating coastal laws and causing harm to the marine life of the area.