

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR MARINE TURTLE RESEARCH IN SRI LANKA

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Five of the seven species of marine turtles in the world come ashore to nest in Sri Lanka. They are, the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*), hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). The Turtle Conservation Project (TCP) has initiated turtle conservation programmes in Sri Lanka since 1993. The TCP aims to devise education, research and community participation. TCP selected Rekawa, a small village on the South coast of Sri Lanka, approximately 10 km east of Tangalle, for the community based turtle conservation activities as its major project site. A 2 km stretch of beach immediately west of the Rekawa headland provides nesting habitat for populations of the five species of marine turtles. Prior to this project, people of this village used to collect turtle eggs and occasionally killed turtles for consumption.

The research programme and the *in-situ* nest protection programme were managed by six research officers. Seventeen villagers who collected eggs on the beach (eggs poachers) were employed to assist the programme as nest protectors. The primary aim of the project was collecting biological data on nesting female populations of marine turtles and hatchlings of each species present at the Rekawa turtle rookery. About 2050 m stretch of beach on the project site (Rekawa beach) was marked by wooden posts at 50-meter intervals. The beach was patrolled 24 hours each day and 365 days each year. Nesting activities were recorded from the time a turtle emerged from the sea and until it returned to sea.

We were able to tag 827 individual turtles that came to nest during the study period (September 1996 to July 2000), of which 90.9% were green turtles. A total of 3328 nests were made by the five species of turtles, of which 96.7% were green turtle nests and 3.3% were of other four species. Both positive and negative attitudes of the community members were observed when they were working for the research programme. However, it was found that most of the community members could be easily trained to assist the research hatchling production from this regionally significant turtle rookery and enhancing the community participation for research and conservation work. The funds received for the program made it possible to offer alternate sources of income to people who would have otherwise made a living from turtle egg poaching.

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