

MEET THE TEAM OF FISHERMEN IN VISAKHAPATNAM WHO SAVED THE ENDANGERED WHALE SHARK

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

On December 18, 2020, it was a regular day for Masena and a small team of fishermen who were returning home after work at the Tantadi beach near NTPC on the outskirts of Visakhapatnam. The beach was deserted; barring the sound of waves crashing, it was all quiet. The tide was low by late afternoon as Masena walked at a leisurely pace, manning the Olive Ridley nesting zones that the beach was known for.

None was ready for the action that was in store.

Just then, a bit ahead on the shore they spotted a massive marine species flapping its huge tail even as waves lashed on it. "I knew it was something unusual," says Masena. A closer look at it confirmed Masena's doubt. It was a 15-foot whale shark – the world's largest fish species. This shark is listed as endangered in the IUCN list and protected under Schedule I of the Wild Life Protection Act. Masena, who works closely with the AP Department of Forest for marine life conservation, sprung into action and informed the forest officials.

What followed next was an exemplary success story of a rare rescue mission with the active involvement of the local community. After Masena's first call, it took about two hours for Srikanth Manneपुरi, a photographer, to arrive at the spot. "The light was fading and I still had to walk three kilometres to reach the spot. I knew I had to act fast to capture the species on camera for identification," he says. Without losing much time, Srikanth used his drone to cover the distance and captured a video to ascertain that it was indeed a whale shark.

Led by Anant Shankar, District Forest Officer of Visakhapatnam, the whale shark was towed back into the waters with the help of a team of fishermen. "It took nearly two hours to release the shark. When I first saw the fish, I knew this species was endangered. It is a gentle, docile creature and lives on plankton and small fish. So I was not afraid and also alerted the other fishermen. We saw the shark flap its huge tail out of distress and stayed away from that part to avoid injury," says Masena.

According to Shankar, the high tides played a significant role in the rescue operations. "But the main role here was played by the local fishing community. This incidence only reiterates the importance of engaging actively with local community to make them ambassadors of marine life conservation," says Shankar.

Whale sharks are highly valued in international markets. There is a big demand for their meat, fins and oil, which pose a threat to the species, particularly by unregulated fisheries. According to recent research findings by nature conservation bodies, in the last 75 years whale shark populations have declined by an estimated 63%. Over-fishing, habitat loss, slow reproduction, climate change and tourism — all remain threats to their population. The species are also victims of bycatch (accidental capture of non-target species in fishing gear). It is in this context that the role of State Forest Departments and NGOs in engaging with local communities becomes significant.

Since 2013, the East Godavari River Estuarine Ecosystem (EGREE) worked closely in association with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department by conducting awareness programmes and workshops among the local communities in the region for marine and biodiversity

conversation. “The idea is to make the fishing community the ambassadors of marine conservation. We have trained some members of the community for turtle protection camps with the Olive Ridley Turtle nesting season underway. These fishermen are also given awareness on other protected marine species and they in turn play a vital role in the rescue missions of trapped marine species like the recent whale shark incident,” says Shankar.

In the Andhra Pradesh coast, Kakinada, Visakhapatnam, Machilipatnam and Nizampatnam are major shark landing areas. Blacktip sharks, bull sharks, pelagic and big-eye thresher shark, smooth and scalloped hammerhead, and tiger sharks are the species that are hunted frequently on these coasts. Of these, the smooth and scalloped hammerhead are classified as threatened species by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Scalloped hammerheads are categorised on the IUCN Red List as critically endangered.

“Not just making the fishing community familiar with marine species, the fishermen also need to be recognised for saving the species. “They have not let the whale shark die even after finding it stranded at a deserted coast. It is not easy to track what fishers do with endangered species in the middle of the oceans or in remote coastal stretches. This indeed is a great conservation success story,” adds Shankar.

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