

‘OPERATION OLIVIA’ TO THE RESCUE OF OLIVE RIDLEY'S

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

Helping hand:Coast Guard personnel rescuing an Olive Ridley turtle.Special Arrangement

Every year, the Indian Coast Guard’s “Operation Olivia”, initiated in the early 1980s, helps protect Olive Ridley turtles as they congregate along the Odisha coast for breeding and nesting from November to December.

“For optimal results, round-the-clock surveillance is conducted from November till May utilising Coast Guard assets such as fast patrol vessels, air cushion vessels, interceptor craft and Dornier aircraft to enforce laws near the rookeries,” a Coast Guard officer said. “From November 2020 to May 2021, the Coast Guard devoted 225 ship days and 388 aircraft hours to protect 3.49 lakh turtles that laid eggs along the Odisha coast.”

The Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) is listed as vulnerable under the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red list. All five species of sea turtles found in India are included in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and in the Appendix I of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which prohibits trade in turtle products by signatory countries. Odisha has also formulated laws for protecting Olive Ridley turtles, and the Orissa Marine Fisheries Act empowers the Coast Guard as one of its enforcement agencies.

“Studies have found three main factors that damage Olive Ridley turtles and their eggs — heavy predation of eggs by dogs and wild animals, indiscriminate fishing with trawlers and gill nets, and beach soil erosion,” the officer said.

Dense fishing activity along the coasts of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal, especially ocean-going trawlers, mechanised fishing boats and gill-netters pose a severe threat to turtles.

Coordination of efforts is done at various levels, the officer explained, including enforcing the use of turtle excluder devices (TED) by trawlers in the waters adjoining nesting areas; prohibiting the use of gill nets on turtle approaches to the shore; and curtailing turtle poaching.

Nesting habits

The Olive Ridley has one of the most extraordinary nesting habits in the natural world, including mass nesting called arribadas. The 480-km-long Odisha coast has three arribada beaches at Gahirmatha, the mouth of the Devi river, and in Rushikulya, where about 1 lakh nests are found annually.

More recently, a new mass nesting site has been discovered on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with more than 5,000 nests reported in a season, according to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries.

“Sea turtles generally return to their natal beach, or where they were born, to lay eggs as adults,” the Coast Guard officer explained. Mating occurs in the offshore waters of the breeding grounds and females then come ashore to nest, usually several times during a season. They crawl ashore, dig a flask-shaped nest about 1.5 to 2 feet deep, and lay 100 to 150 eggs in each

clutch. Hatchlings emerge from their nests together in seven to 10 weeks.

"Between the arrival of the mother and the hatchlings' retreat to the sea, they go through various challenges. It is estimated that only one in a thousand survive to adulthood," the officer added.

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