

IN VISAKHAPATNAM, CONSERVATION EFFORTS ARE ON TO SAVE THE OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLES

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AP Forest Department officials and guards releasing Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings from the hatchery as part of the sea turtles community conservation project at R K Beach in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

Carrying a torch in hand, a wooden stick and a bucket, Appala Raju, a fisherman in Visakhapatnam, patrols the Sagar Nagar beach every night for Olive Ridley turtle eggs as December arrives every year. The 52-year-old can easily spot the nests following the tracks of the mother. Not too long ago, he used to turn a blind eye to turtle carcasses lying on the coast. Today, he is a trained guard working in association with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department to protect marine turtles on the beaches of Visakhapatnam which is a sporadic nesting site of Olive Ridley turtles. The turtle is listed as vulnerable under the red list of threatened species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. This year, the total number of nests recorded from January to March is 595 with 45,918 eggs in Visakhapatnam district.

An Olive Ridley turtle hatchling that was released by AP Forest Department making its way into the Bay of Bengal at RK Beach in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

"I wait every season for the turtles to come and lay eggs. It is a joy to witness hundreds of tiny hatchlings make their way into the sea after months of keeping a vigil," says Appala Raju. His work of safeguarding the turtle nests starts from the end of December and goes on till April, sometimes even May. He carefully transfers the eggs into his bucket and places them vertically at the hatchery at Sagar Nagar, mimicking their position in their natural nests.

Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings that were released by AP Forest Department, making their way into the Bay of Bengal, as part of the sea turtles community conservation project at R K Beach in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

Once placed in the hatchery, each nest is labelled to mark the number of eggs and probable date of hatching. Following this, the wait for a period of 45 to 50 days begins for Appala Raju. Like him, there are about 20 local fishermen who have been trained by the AP Forest Department to safeguard the four Olive Ridley hatcheries in Visakhapatnam district and keep a vigil along the coast during the nesting season. They are part of the community conservation project initiated by the State Forest Department. The conservation effort, which began more than a decade ago, is bringing about a change in the mindset of the local fishing community who

have turned into allies to save the sea turtles.

A guard trained under AP Forest Department keeping the eggs collected from nests of Olive Ridley turtle into the hatchery as part of the sea turtles community conservation project at R K Beach in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

The fishermen-turned-guards along with the forest department officials have been systematically releasing hatchlings into the Bay of Bengal off Visakhapatnam coast over the past one month.

“Our engagement with the fishing community is an ongoing process. The success of the conservation project lies in involving the fishing community who are an integral part of the coast. Each hatchery in Visakhapatnam is monitored by five fishermen trained by us,” says Anant Shankar, Divisional Forest Officer, Visakhapatnam division.

The enclosed hatchery protects the eggs from predators like dogs and human disturbances on the beach. Incidentally, the Olive Ridley turtles take 25 to 30 years to reach adulthood but survival rate of the young ones is abysmally low.

An Olive Ridley turtle hatchling that was released by AP Forest Department, making their way into the Bay of Bengal, as part of the sea turtles community conservation project at R K Beach in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

To spread awareness about sea turtles, last December the Visakhapatnam division of the AP Forest Department had released a documentary on marine turtle conservation titled *Saviours of the Sea – Tryst with the City of Destiny*, capturing the journey of Olive Ridley turtles from the vast sea to the shores of Visakhapatnam as they proceed for nesting.

Even as the sea turtle conservation project has been successful in many ways in mitigating sea turtle deaths and damage to nesting sites, the risks remain high.

The changing beach profile, piling plastic waste in deep sea and frequency of deaths of Olive Ridley turtles are some of the issues of concern for the forest department and environmentalists. Earlier this year, hundreds of Olive Ridley turtles were washed ashore along the coastline between Kakinada and Antarvedi in the Godavari region during the peak breeding season.

Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings that were released by AP Forest Department, making their way into the Bay of Bengal, as part of the sea turtles community conservation project at R K Beach in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

To address the issue of mortality rates and make a detailed study, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) India has been working with the fishing community and trawl boat operators association in Visakhapatnam, Kakinada and Srikakulam coasts. As part of the study, trial runs are being conducted to assess the impact of ghost nets and plastic waste in deep sea. “The trial runs are going on for a month now. We will be doing 15 trial runs with five trawler boats before the fishing ban begins in April. When the fishermen haul the net, they segregate ghost nets and plastic wastes. We are in the process of analysing this data. The objective is to assess reasons of threat to marine life, offer solutions and promote dynamic congregation zones for marine species like sea turtles,” says Farida Tampal, State director, WWF-India.

One of the Olive Ridley turtle hatchling that was released by AP Forest Department, making its way into the Bay of Bengal at RK Beach in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

The changing beach profile is another issue of concern. “In Bhimli, we have seen a significant

amount of red mud being deposited in the beach. These are critical sea turtle nesting zones and such kind of disturbances can be a threat,” adds Farida.

Among the four hatcheries in Visakhapatnam, R K Beach has seen fewer nestings as compared to last year. The beach is also highly prone to littering and human interference.

Pointing out to the recent illumination of coconut tree patches and enhanced lighting at R K Beach, Anant Shankar says: “The coconut trees are eating into turtle nesting areas. The bright lights are a big deterrent for the sea turtles.”

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