

Turtles in the night

April 04, 2008 12:00 am | Updated October 10, 2016 06:14 am IST

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Ever year, Olive Ridley Turtles come ashore to nest. Have you ever been a part of the team that patrols the beach to ensure the safety of the eggs and hatchlings?

Imagine 100 people walking on a beach in the middle of the night, stopping every once in a while to search for, guess what? Turtle eggs and hatchlings!

I was a part of this walk recently in the heart of Chennai in Tamil Nadu! Our aim was to take them to the safety of a 'hatchery'.

As we trudged along the beach, we came across the tractor-like tracks of a turtle that must have come ashore to lay her eggs. The tracks are unmistakable. These are caused by the feet and back flippers of the turtle as it drags itself across the sand. **Unique walk**

But try as we might, we could not locate the nest that the turtle must have dug, to drop its eggs. An hour later, we

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came across another set of tracks, and this time located the nest.

As our expert guides dug, a wave of excitement went through the group... one by one, turtle hatchlings emerged from the hole. They began walking and we guided them to the sea so they could swim off. We found and released 87!

This night exercise has been a part of a unique “turtle walk” organised by conservationists in Chennai for the last 20 years! Every year when the nesting season of the Olive Ridley turtles comes around, people gather to patrol the beach every night. They ensure that no-one digs up the eggs or hatchlings to eat them, and when they find eggs, they transfer them to a safe enclosed hatchery.

Why do they need to do this? Because the Chennai beach is visited by thousands of people, and by dogs, and the turtles could easily be disturbed or dug up.

Another threat faced by the hatchlings is the lighting along the beach. When they emerge from the nest, these turtles look for the brightest part of the horizon and head there. In natural conditions, this would be the sea. In Chennai, however, it is now brighter inland than at sea! Chennai’s turtle volunteers spend hours every night to ensure that this does not happen.

That night, as I watched these tiny creatures take to the sea, I could not help but say a little prayer for their safe passage...and hope that one day, the females among them would come back to nest on this very beach

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group (>kalpavriksh_delhi@gmail.com) **What you can do**

If you want more information on the Chennai volunteers, or about the amazing story of sea turtles migrating thousands of kilometres to nest, contact

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V. Arun at >arun.tree@gmail.com .

If you want to do something about the threats that turtles face from fishing trawlers and upcoming ports in Orissa contact the author at >ashishkothari@vsnl.com .

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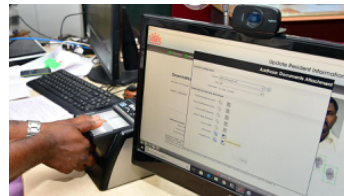
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