

# SSTCN TURTLE DIARY OF 2025 - THE SEASON OF LOWS AND HIGHS IN CHENNAI

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## A Flourishing Start

The 2025 nesting season started with a flourish with a workshop on turtle conservation awareness on the theme *Sea Turtle Conservation in India, Past, Present and Future*, organised by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department (FD). All the stakeholders involved, including turtle scientists from across the country, conservationists from within the state, along with all the officers and staff of the FD involved in turtle conservation were invited. There was a sense of preparedness to meet the start of the season like never before. There was a strong sense of optimism and excitement in the air.

## Depressing January

As such, no one was prepared for the extremely distressing month of January 2025. Every night scores of fresh dead turtles washed ashore, many of them gravid females who would have laid their eggs in the coming months. After the last decade and more we have come to expect the sight of dead turtles at the start of the season. The number of dead turtles fluctuate each year, as do the number of nests. During the early 2000s we would count around 25 dead turtles on the beach area monitored by SSTCN. More recently, the numbers had gone up quite dramatically to anywhere between 100 and 300 dead turtles per season. In one bad year (2015) numbers went well beyond 300 dead turtles. But this season, we crossed 300 strandings within the first 10 days of January. By the end of January, we had reached 1,300 strandings.

## FD's Quick Response and the Nodal Task Force

In response to a *Suo moto* case filed by a judge of the Madras High court in the year 2015, a Nodal Task Force was established in 2017 to set up frameworks and protocols to reduce sea turtle mortality. The PCCF was quick to reconvene the task force to look into the matter this year. While the matter was being discussed with all stakeholders, including fishers from different associations (mechanized fishing boats and motorized country boats), the number of strandings kept going up. The FD along with the Fisheries Department and Coast Guard took a

number of steps to make sure that the law that prohibits trawl boats fishing within the five nautical mile zone was implemented.

As a part of the task force, I learned about devices called transponders, which were fitted onto all boats to trace their movements from the shore itself. A surveillance wing of the FD traced the movement of the boats and reported violations of fishing within 5nm of the coastline to the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF). They informed the Fisheries Commissioner who then initiated action against the erring trawlers. The Coast Guard was also on patrol to make sure that boats didn't fish within the banned areas. Four fishers from different vessels were put under arrest for violating the law. Many cases were booked against trawlers.

## The Press

The press was picking up on the strandings, with some newspapers publishing regular stories and various social media handles from the general public reporting an alarming number from various beaches. The arrest of the fishers caused an uproar within the fishing community and the local Tamizh media highlighted the issue, being sympathetic towards the fishermen. The English media was more accusative of them. A polarised situation was quickly building, with of Chennai on the side of the turtles and the poorer communities aligning with the fishers. Senior scientists and conservationists like Dr Kartik Shanker were quick to point out that blaming fishers ultimately doesn't help the turtles, as demonstrated in Odisha. Dr Shanker pointed out that it is important to get all stakeholders to a common forum, and solutions should emerge from and through the direct participants.

It was still a puzzle as to why turtles were dying in such numbers. While the cause of death of turtles was obvious to us turtle people, the fishermen were citing climate change as a major cause and ocean pollution from industry and many other factors. While these factors were responsible in the long term for harming ocean life in general and turtle populations in particular, the immediate cause of death was due to drowning in fishing nets. A number

of necropsies were performed by the Vepey Veterinary Hospital and found the cause of death to be drowning. But many of the turtles that washed ashore were already in a decomposed state and as such necropsy was often not possible.

### **Alternative Perspectives**

One senior fisher, Mr Palayam, who has been studying and documenting various signs of the sea for the past several years, said that there was an unusual current this year, which brought in a higher number of dead turtles to the shore. The number of dead turtles that wash ashore can depend on oceanographic process, climatic factors, season and distance from shore (e.g., Cook *et al.*, 2021; Nardi *et al.*, 2025). If Mr Palayam's observations about the ocean currents running in the opposite direction were correct, that would account for the higher number of dead turtles washed ashore. But there were no other studies to corroborate his observation.

### **Increasing Use of Squid Nets**

We also heard from local fishers from different villages that local small-scale artisanal fishers were using a much higher number of squid nets and ray nets within the village limits, and that these were entangling the turtles. We alerted the FD and Fisheries Department about this situation, and they addressed it through awareness programs in the fishing villages. However, we had no clear evidence to account for the much higher number of dead turtles in 2025. Also, puzzling was that a disproportionately large number of stranded dead turtles were found in the Chennai and Kanchipuram districts but no other coastal districts of Tamil Nadu.

### **Positive Actions**

We were happy that the passionate Forest Secretary, Ms Supriya Sahu, was posted back into the department after a brief hiatus elsewhere. She promptly called for a meeting which was presided over by the Forest Minister Mr K. Ponmudy, during which the senior members of the FD and other branches of the Government, scientists, experts from across the country, the animal welfare board, and turtle conservationists discussed the issue. The turtle issue was gaining momentum in all spheres.

A budget was sanctioned to buy two boats for the FD and Fisheries Department to monitor fishing in near-shore waters. Awareness camps and workshops were being held in every fishing village. This opportunity was used to create awareness of other endangered species as well. SSTCN members, Nishanth and Krithi participated

in these activities along with the FD. Each fishing village has a women's group called the *Sagar Mitra* who responded positively to these workshops and promised to work towards safeguarding the ocean in general and endangered species in particular. This work is to continue along the coast even during the off season.

### **Hope Awakens in February**

As the number of dead turtles kept rising, so did our despair. In the meantime, our public walks were due to start and the number of emails requesting a slot to join a walk was skyrocketing. We wondered if people hadn't been following the news and had not heard about the turtle strandings. We were unsure about conducting the public walks, with many at SSTCN feeling that there may be no turtle season at all with all the turtles that came to nest having been killed. But some in our group felt that we should go ahead and conduct the public walks and people should witness the problem.

And then on the night of the first of February, a lone olive ridley female came ashore and laid eggs. Many of us wept. We were not sure if she was one of a few who survived or if the tides were going to change. Nesting increased steadily. There was no drop in the occurrence of dead turtles but finding nests helped lift the feeling of gloom and doom.

### **Magical February**

As days went by, we began to find more and more nests. It was slowly dawning on us that this could be a big season. Excitement started to build among the team. Everyone had numbed themselves till now in the face of so much death, but here was a totally new feeling blossoming. Did we dare hope? The answer seemed to be emphatic, YES.

As we settled into the exciting work, the usual share of problems began to creep up. These problems in the long run or after a season is over don't seem so big, but while the season is going on, they can cause a lot of stress.

One such problem this year was the app that was developed by the FD ostensibly to help with being more organized with moving nests to the hatchery. The SSTCN volunteers were not given access to the app. For a while, every time we found a nest we had to inform the FD staff and wait for them to come to remove the nest. We then had to again wait to relocate the nest into the hatchery. This made our turtle walks redundant except for interactions with the public. SSTCN and the FD walking at separate times for better monitoring coverage

of the beach wasn't working out at all. The situation took quite a bit of sorting out, even though the warden Mr Manish Meena was very supportive of us. Later in the season, we were given access to the app.

### **Public Turtle Walks**

This year's public turtle walks were very good. The walks were well organised thanks to Dr Lakshmi who has been attending to the public registration process by email for many years now. As is our policy, we focused on schools, colleges and families. Keeping the numbers on each walk to a manageable level was the challenge. There were good discussions in both Tamil and English. Sometimes, there were discussions in three groups on a single walk to cater to different age groups and language groups. Most of the people who attended the walks got to witness some activity, like eggs being collected and moved to a hatchery, hatchlings being released, and of course the best experience of all, a live nesting turtle. To be able to facilitate these special moments for people, who are invariably moved by these experiences, is something we are grateful for.

### **Social Media Woes**

SSTCN has usually been shy of publicity, as we like to keep our heads down and focus on the work. While the public walks and hatchling releases are hugely popular and are overbooked, we have felt that any more media attention would work adversely for us and the turtles we want to protect. Additionally, the media tends to glorify the walkers while paying scant attention to the plight of turtles.

The FD was also quite particular about unwanted attention from the media. So, while we had a social media page, we barely posted on it. Our absence in this space created a void, which was filled by others who claimed to be doing the work that we were doing. This has previously caused a lot of unhappiness among our team. This year we reversed our policy and decided to post on the SSTCN Instagram page regularly. This change surprised many, but people were also relieved that we were claiming our space in some ways.

We stayed away from the mainstream media as it was mostly focusing on turtle deaths. But with the collaboration of Better India, a series of articles covering various aspects of turtle conservation in Chennai were published. This balanced perspective helped to gain a wider understanding.

### **Crowd Management at the Hatchery**

In 2024, a post by one visitor to the hatchery went viral and was one of the reasons for huge turnouts at the hatchery. Managing the crowds became the main task of the volunteers at the hatchery and we didn't have the bandwidth to manage this number of people. There were many days when nearly a thousand people waited to see a few hatchlings being released into the sea. We tried briefing in separate groups and splitting the crowds for them to at least witness the hatchlings. All this caused a lot of stress among the team. This year, we were very clear that we couldn't go through the same.

Hence, in 2025, we negotiated with Save a Turtle, another organisation, whose participation in the turtle season was restricted only to creating awareness and bringing groups of people to the hatchery. We decided that we would try and restrict the public to 100 people a day between the two groups. While this didn't quite work within that number, we didn't have the huge numbers like last year.

As SSTCN is a loose network of people, we have not felt a need to establish ourselves with any branding. But with new organisations working in the same space, we felt a need for an identity for ourselves. So, for only the second time in nearly three decades, we made a t-shirt for ourselves.

### **Hatchery Management**

The FD had built a huge hatchery to start 2025 but given the number of nests we collected this year, it had to be extended twice. Since 2006, we have been adding a jute cover on the hatchery around the end of March to prevent overheating. The original jute covering didn't cover the two extensions in 2025; new layers had to be added, and there was a delay of a few days in the process where the eggs in the extension faced extreme heat. We also had unseasonal heavy rain in April. In the climate change era, summer rain has become the norm. The combination of heavy rain and extreme heat had a negative impact on survival of eggs in the extensions. As always, we had high success with hatchlings emerging from the nests laid in February. As usual, as the season progressed, the hatching success rate kept dropping.

In the last three years, we have had a very good team headed by Abhishaek to manage the hatchery. This year, Aakash, who was part of the team in the last few years, took complete charge as Abhishaek had moved. Aakash, Nambirajan, Gopal, Nishfa, Kadambari, and many others monitored the hatchery round the clock. This is the most beautiful aspect of a volunteer organization like SSTCN.

Everyone brings total commitment out of an inner zeal to do their bit for the more than human world.

Thanks to the large number of nests, we had hatchlings emerging almost every day in March and April and we had public releases every evening followed by continuous releases through the evening as hatchlings kept emerging. Then monitoring would be done by night volunteers like Prem, Gopal and others.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this was a phenomenal season with so many different dimensions playing out on all fronts. We are happy that the turtles and their conservation got some attention from the Government, media and public. We ended the season after collecting 382 nests with 42,728 eggs to incubate in the hatchery and released 28,293 hatchlings.

We are deeply grateful for this opportunity to work towards the conservation of a gentle and beautiful

being, the olive ridley turtle. We are happy for the close and trusted collaboration with the Forest Department without whose support and help the program wouldn't be the same.

A special mention needs to be made of the Warden of Chennai, Mr Manish Meena who was most cooperative and supportive, Mr Rakesh Dogra the PCCF, and Mr Reddy the HOD for their expert handling of a very difficult year.

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