

## MISCELLANEOUS NOTE

### 10. A LEATHERY TURTLE *DERMOCHELYS CORIACEA* (LINNAEUS) COMING ASHORE FOR LAYING EGGS DURING THE DAY

Sometime ago an interesting instance of the leathery turtle coming ashore for laying eggs during the day came to my notice and this is recorded here, since from the available literature it is seen that turtles in general come ashore for this purpose only during night time.

While at Calicut, Kerala, I received information at about 5 p.m. on 2nd July 1956 that a large turtle had come ashore at West Hill and had deposited eggs. I reached the place in a few minutes' time and found a giant specimen of the leathery turtle *Dermochelys coriacea* (Linnaeus) hardly 50 metres from the sea surrounded by a large crowd of people. On enquiry it was learnt that the turtle first came ashore at about 3.00 p.m. nearly a quarter of a mile to the south and evidently disturbed by the presence of people returned to the sea and came up to the present spot which was comparatively a more quiet place. After scooping out sand with its flippers it had laid between ninety and hundred eggs which were immediately removed by the local people who had assembled there. As characteristic of turtles at egg-laying time it was reported to have been very little disturbed by the presence of people around or by the noise and commotion that prevailed there. The egg-laying was over by the time I reached the place and the turtle was by then making efforts to cover up the nest quite oblivious to the fact that all the eggs were already removed. It was a sunny day but the sand was moist on account of the rain during previous days. After turning over a good deal of sand with its flippers it proceeded towards the sea. On coming to the shore line which had an abrupt drop due to the wave action it slid down sideways and then steadied itself and entered the water. The first wave it confronted dragged it for some distance towards the shore but soon it appeared to recover from the initial inertia, and proceeded with ease in a north-westerly direction and gradually disappeared from sight.

The total length of the turtle from snout to tail taken in a straight line was 6 ft. 3 in. The width of the carapace along the curvature

was 3 ft. 10 in. and in a straight line 2 ft. 10 in. The body was slate coloured with white spots and a mottled white patch was present on the head. Some eggs were purchased from the people who had collected them and were examined. They were white in colour, and spherical with a leathery shell, and had an average diameter of 52.5 mm. A few of the eggs were kept buried in the sand but these failed to hatch out. Those opened at periodic intervals did not show any developing embryos.

The fishing canoes belonging to the Central Marine Fisheries Research Station at Calicut are kept near the place where the turtle had laid the eggs and the fieldmen in charge of them informed me subsequently that they had seen on a few occasions in previous years young turtles proceeding to the sea from this area, pursued and harassed by crows. No one has actually seen any turtle coming ashore near this spot formerly and in the absence of specimens of young turtles it is not possible to say anything as to their identity.

Deraniyagala in *TETRAPOD REPTILES OF CEYLON Vol I, 1939* has given detailed notes on the egg-laying habits of the various turtles in Indo-Ceylon waters. According to him the leathery turtle comes ashore only during night time, generally between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m. It probably lays eggs three or four times a year but the breeding season in Ceylon reaches its peak during May and June. The incubation period is about 70 days.

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[M. W. F. Tweedie (*Proc. Zool. Soc. London* **123**: 273-74—1953/54) gives a graphic illustrated account of the nesting and egg-laying habits of this turtle observed at night.—EDS.]