

Protecting Sea Turtles

What is the issue?

\n\n

The rising death toll of sea turtles call for integrated conservation measures to protect the protectors of marine ecosystem.

\n\n

How diverse are sea turtles in India?

\n\n

\n

- There are five species of sea turtles in Indian waters:

\n

\n\n

\n

1. Leatherback

\n

2. Loggerhead

\n

3. Hawksbill

\n

4. Green

\n

5. Olive Ridley

\n

\n\n



\n\n

\n

- The turtle breeding season is usually between November and December.

\n

- E.g. Olive Ridley nests between December and April along the Chennai-Kancheepuram coastline in Tamil Nadu.

\n

- The eastern coastline is the feeding area for Olive Ridley, juvenile Hawksbills

and Green turtles.

\n

- Off-shore waters are also migratory routes for the Olive Ridley while moving towards beaches in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

\n

\n\n

What is the significance?

\n\n

\n

- Sea turtles, especially the leatherback, keep **jellyfish** under control.
- \n
- This in turn helps maintain healthy **fish stocks** in the oceans.
- \n
- The Green turtle feeds on sea grass beds.
- \n
- Turtle populations could improve **seagrass ecosystem** health by removing seagrass biomass and preventing sediment formation.
- \n
- By cropping the grass, they provide a nursery for numerous species of fish, shellfish and crustaceans.
- \n
- The Hawksbill feeds on sponges in the coral reef ecosystem and opens up crevices for other marine life to live in.
- \n
- Turtles are also **transporters of nutrients and energy** to coastal areas.
- \n
- Unhatched eggs, eggshells and fluids help foster decomposers and create much needed **fertilizer** in sandy beaches.

\n

\n\n

What are the threats?

\n\n

\n

- In India, sea turtles are protected under the Indian Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, under the Schedule I Part II.
- \n
- Despite this legal protection they face grave threats.
- \n
- Bycatch is one such example, which is the name given to ocean animals that are unintentionally caught by fishing gear.

- \n
- Notably, high number of dead turtles washing up ashore is recorded each year.
- \n
- Thousands of sea turtles are accidentally captured, injured or killed.
- \n
- The mechanised boats, trawl nets and gill nets operated and used by commercial fishermen are the major causes.
- \n
- The heavy toll of injuries and deaths occurs when turtles begin migrating.
- \n
- It could be to their nesting grounds on beaches or fishing areas that are their feeding grounds.
- \n

\n\n

How are the protective measures working?

\n\n

- \n
- **Limits** - Under current regulations, mechanised trawl boats have operation limitations ranging from 5 to 8 kms in different states.
- \n
- They include Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Odisha.
- \n
- There are also limitations on use of nets, especially those designed for bigger ones like ray fish, during the turtle breeding season.
- \n
- However, the enforcement and monitoring of these limits and regulations are weak.
- \n
- **TEDs** - Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) are two-dimensional net inserts with large escape openings for turtles.
- \n
- By law, trawlers meant for shrimp fishing are required to be fitted with TEDs, in India.
- \n
- If used correctly, TEDs have been found to reduce turtle captures by 90%; but the practice is very less.
- \n
- **Closed Seasons** - There are closed seasons for certain types of fishing vessels, at different times in different states.
- \n
- Trawlers and motorised craft with an engine output greater than 25 hp are

banned during this period.

\n

- Unfortunately, none of these closed seasons takes into account the sea turtle nesting season that falls between January and April.

\n

\n\n

What is the way forward?

\n\n

\n

- Declining turtle populations in general, signify the declining role of turtles in maintaining the health of the marine ecosystem.

\n

- Integrated conservation measures are needed to rebuild their populations to healthy levels.

\n

- Proper law enforcement and monitoring by the respective fisheries departments, marine police and Indian Coast Guard are essential.

\n

- All trawl boats should be fitted with a vessel monitoring system traceable by the Coast Guard.

\n

- Areas where sea turtles forage and congregate need to be identified.

\n

- Additional seasonal closures need to be implemented within these areas.

\n

- Ongoing work to have new fishing nets and gear that reduce the amount of bycatch while fishing should be encouraged further.

\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu

\n\n

\n



SHANKAR
IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering