

418/D

Assessment of knowledge, attitude and contribution of coastal communities in marine turtle conservation

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The Marine Turtle Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Sri Lanka prepared in 2005 highlights the importance of local involvement in marine turtle conservation providing alternatives to the coastal communities developing their talents and increasing awareness in the sustainable use of natural resources. A questionnaire study was conducted in six coastal villages with different nesting frequency and turtle by-catch to assess the knowledge of the coastal community about marine turtles and their attitude and contribution towards conservation of marine turtles. From each village 100 randomly selected villagers were interviewed. Majority of the coastal community was poor with only primary or less education and mainly involved in fishing or fishing related occupations. Respondents from nesting areas had a significantly better knowledge about turtles than those from non nesting villages. Most of the villagers had a positive attitude towards sea turtle conservation and claimed that they contribute to conservation of sea turtles by not consuming turtle meat or eggs or by selling or purchasing turtle products for the last ten years. However, respondents from northwestern parts of the island where there is high turtle by-catch had poor knowledge about marine turtles and continue to consume or sell their meat. Non-governmental organizations such as Turtle Conservation Project (TCP) conducts community based conservation activities like in-situ nest protection and research and educational programmes aimed at local communities previously dependent on marine turtle egg poaching in southern and southwestern coast. Political instability and civil war in the northern part of the island often hamper conservation activities where live turtles are sold openly in some areas of Mannar. This study highlights the importance of introducing awareness programmes specially focusing northwestern coastal areas where there is high incidental by-catch and also enforcement of legislative measures controlling killing of turtles and poaching their eggs needs to be strengthened in the northern part of the island.

Financial Assistance by the International Foundation for Science (IFS) A/3863-1 is acknowledged.

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