

2.2 A True Story of Sea Turtles

■ ■ ■ Warming up! ■ ■ ■

It is our world, too!

1. Observe the following photographs. What is common among all these animals? They are all endangered species. They are likely to die out completely, one of the reasons being human activity in their habitat. If these animals could think and speak like humans, what would they say?



Form groups of 5-8. Prepare short autobiographical speeches for each of these animals (10-15 lines). Use the following points :

- How the animal lives – It's the only way he/she can.
 - How he interacts with nature and other animals.
 - How humans interact with that species – whether it is fair, necessary or desirable, etc.
 - The possible ill effects of the way human beings treat the animals, for the whole living world.
 - The animal getting ready to bid farewell to this world.
2. Hold a classroom discussion on the following topics and later on, expand the themes on your own. (10-15 lines)
 - Why human beings need to use more and more natural resources.
 - Should we conserve only the most beautiful and most useful things in nature?
 - What is 'beautiful' or 'useful'? Who has the right to decide that?

A True Story of Sea Turtles

We were surveying the white bellied sea-eagles in the summer that year. As we roamed the coasts, one of the volunteers in our team saw some shallow pits with white egg shells nearby. Enquiries with the villagers revealed that they were turtle eggs. This came as a surprise. We had never come across turtle eggs in our walks along the beaches of Konkan in all these years. We decided to study this unusual occurrence further. We learnt that the beach where we had found the egg shells had been sealed to the public for nearly one month, after people smuggling silver bricks were caught in that area. But what we learnt further shocked us to the core.

Turtles nest along the entire coastline of our State. There are a few people in every village who keep combing the beach in the early hours of the morning, throughout the year. When the female turtle comes on shore to nest and to lay eggs, she leaves behind a trail just like a track of wheels on the sand. The egg hunters follow this trail right up to the nest which is about half a metre deep. They dig up the nest, and steal all the 100-150 eggs that are laid inside. These eggs are then either eaten or are sold in the market. If a turtle is spotted while it is still laying eggs, it is allowed to live till the laying is over. As soon as the eggs are laid, it is caught, and then killed and eaten. This ruthless practice is observed in all parts of the world. However, in India, sea turtles have been given protection by including them under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. That means turtles have been given as much protection as tigers. Therefore, all this business of gathering turtle eggs and killing turtles is carried on in a secret, hush-hush manner. This information was distressing. We began to think seriously about it. We decided to undertake a project for the protection and conservation of turtles and their nests in Maharashtra.

- ◆ What unusual occurrence did the volunteers notice?
- ◆ Why were turtle eggs seen on the beach after it had been sealed to the public? What were the implications?



- ◆ Why have these turtles been protected in India?



- ◆ Why were the people asked to look for the eggs or nests in the morning?

- ◆ The elderly persons had seen the hatchlings for the first time. What does it indicate?

We had no experience regarding sea-turtles, so first of all we undertook a study of turtles. We contacted institutes that work for the protection of turtles in India. The next step was launching a Turtle Protection Campaign at Velas, Taluka Mandangad, District Ratnagiri. This was done with the support and co-operation of the Forest Department. As part of the campaign, a few local people were specially appointed to look for turtle nests on the beach in the morning. When they came across a nest, they had to carefully remove the eggs from the nest, and bury them again in a similar pit, but one protected with wire fencing. They

had to watch over the protected nest to prevent thefts. In the first year, we could successfully protect 50 nests in this manner. When the babies hatched out of the eggs, what an event that was! The whole village rushed to the beach to witness the spectacle. When the tiny turtle hatchlings hurried across the silver sands to meet the rolling boundless sea, what an ovation they received from the onlookers! Some of the elderly villagers confessed that though they had seen (and stolen) turtle eggs right from their school days, it was for the first time that they had seen the hatchlings rushing to the sea.

There are seven types of sea turtles in the world, five of which are found in India. The Olive Ridley turtles nest along the entire coastline of Maharashtra. Green turtles and Hawksbills have also been found. An amazing characteristic of turtles is that when the female turtle reaches maturity, that is, nearly after a gap of 15 years, she returns to the shore to lay her eggs at the same place where she was born. The female comes on shore, just to make a nest in the sand and lay her eggs, and immediately returns to the sea. She does not return to the nest after that. The eggs hatch after a period of 45 to 50 days, using natural heat. Innumerable dangers await the little hatchlings in the deep sea, and they have to face them all on their own. Their survival rate

is therefore as low as just one or two turtles out of a thousand. Turtles perform an important function – they keep the sea clean. Thus, they occupy an important place in marine ecology. Considering all these factors, it is vital to undertake their protection on a large scale.

After the success at Velas, we started implementing the project in other places too. Within five years, the entire coastline of Maharashtra was surveyed. Protection was offered in eighty of the villages where turtle nests were found. Our strategy was to engage those who had so far been involved in stealing the eggs, then to train and involve them in the work of protection. We started the ‘Turtle Friend Awards’ (*Kasav Mitra*) to encourage more people to be a part of the protection campaign. A comprehensive booklet and a short film on the protection of turtles was prepared to spread the message.

The year 2006 saw the beginning of a novel concept – Turtle Festival or *Kasav Mahotsava* – an opportunity for tourists to witness the unique spectacle of the hatchlings rushing out to the sea. A short film on turtles and the natural beauty of Konkan were additional features of the festival. At the same time, we were quite firm on one issue – the hatchlings should not come to even the slightest harm due to this tourist activity. The tourists were accommodated in the homes of the villagers. The response to this novel concept of ‘homestay’ was excellent. A Turtle Friends Club was established in each village, the members being all the villagers offering ‘homestay’. All villages would now offer the same rate for ‘homestay’. They gave ten percent of their income from ‘homestay’ for the Turtle Protection Fund. The fund would be utilised for the purpose of protection and conservation of turtles. Modern technology also helped. The festival reached all corners of the world through the medium of the internet and our website. People around the world began to contact the small villages

- ◆ Why was it necessary to undertake turtle protection on a large scale?
- ◆ Why were those who had stolen the eggs earlier involved in the work of protection? Give at least two reasons.





Protect the turtles and enrich the seas!

◆ What do the 'homestay' families do?

of Konkan. More and more villagers came forward to do this work and the number of 'homestay' families went up to 35. As many as eight hundred people began to visit Velas in the Turtle Season. This meant more business for the villagers. Now they realised that tourism can be a source of income. Tourists bring in money, and in order to earn that money, it was important to protect the turtle hatchlings. This was 'Conservation of Nature through Livelihood' in its true sense. Velas became the project's main success story.

◆ Why was the project entrusted to the local people?

Sahyadri Nisarg Mitra, our organisation believed that it is only the local villagers who can ultimately offer excellent protection to the local species. If they are given the freedom to do that, the conservation projects became sustainable. With this belief, we entrusted the project to the Forest Department, the Gram Panchayat, the villagers and their Turtle Friends Club. All of them are handling it wonderfully. Now we are happy to see the project running smoothly and offer help only when necessary.

- Bhau Katdare
Sahyadri Nisarg Mitra

1. Form groups. Discuss the first two paragraphs. Try to present their content in the form of a series of conversations among the (a) volunteers (b) the volunteers and the villagers.
2. Prepare a short note on sea turtles with the help of the information given in the passage.
3. Prepare a poster to illustrate how the turtle eggs were/are protected. Include the following in the poster.
 - Some pictures of sea turtles and their habitat
 - Information about turtle nests and eggs
 - A picture and information about a 'protected nest'
 - Appeal to the public to spread awareness about their conservation
 - Some data (figures) regarding the achievements so far
4. Prepare a simple brochure regarding the 'homestay' facilities made available in the villages. Form groups and discuss the points you will use in the brochure. Remember to include the precautions that tourists have to take at the site, in your brochure.
5. Explain the idea of 'Conservation of Nature through Livelihood' briefly, using the example given here.
6. Prepare bullet point presentations on the following:
 - (a) Scope for tourism in your locality
 - (b) Prudent utilisation of natural resources
7. Read the following entries in the 'Language Study' pages :
 - (a) clause (b) sentence

Underline the main clause in the following sentences.

 - (1) There are a few people in every village who keep combing the beach in the early hours of the morning, throughout the year.
 - (2) When the female turtle comes on shore to nest and to lay eggs, she leaves behind a trail just like a track of wheels on the sand.
 - (3) The egg hunters follow this trail right up to the nest which is about half a metre deep.
8. **Read** : 'Last Chance to See' by Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine

