

Mumbai sighting of Olive Ridley hatchlings may not be as rare as imagined

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In Versova beach of Mumbai, 80 Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings walked into the sea last week. The local citizens were overjoyed since it was an indication of the success of their systematic efforts at cleaning the beach since 2015. Even though there were doubts if the turtles had really hatched there, the mystery was solved when broken egg shells were discovered. [Some experts feel that turtle hatching may be happening in other beaches and going unnoticed.](#)

The citizens of Mumbai are overjoyed at the birth of 80 Olive Ridley hatchlings on Versova beach in the northwest suburbs after some 20 long years. These hatchlings were given birth to by a single female in the hitherto highly polluted beach and lay undetected till they began to crawl out on Thursday morning.

"The mother turtle visited the site two months ago to lay her eggs," Afroz Shah, a young lawyer who has been single-handedly responsible for the clean-up of Versova beach, said to be the biggest such campaign in the world, told Mongabay-India. "People who grow [methi](#) (fenugreek) on the beach sighted it there and we were keeping a watch. I kept this news to myself because once everybody came to know, they would pose a danger to the hatchlings."

"At 9 am on March 22., one of our clean-up volunteers reported that hatchlings were crawling out. They helped create a passage for the young ones to head to the sea. I was so overwhelmed that I cried. We have worked hard for such a happy occurrence to happen," said Shah.

Baby turtles going into the sea at Versova. Credit: Afroz Shah.

"A single turtle lays a hundred eggs at a time. No one knew about this nest, over which *methi* had been planted. The growers had dug another square pit next to it and it was from there that the hatchlings emerged," he added.

Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings walking into the sea. Photo by Afroz Shah.

Amazingly, under normal circumstances, females return to the very same beach from where they first hatched, to lay their eggs. They lay their eggs in conical nests about one and a half feet deep which they laboriously dig with their hind flippers.

[Egg shells as evidence](#)

Initially, city ecologists were sceptical about this development. For one thing, there were no egg shells visible. Stalin Dayanand, director of the NGO Vanashakti, said, "That's my question. It is highly unlikely that agriculture was being carried out at this nesting site. The most telling evidence is that there was no one at the site and it was not cordoned off."

"It is possible that someone brought the hatchlings and buried them to create a photo opportunity. This carries the highest penalty under the Wildlife Protection Act."

He made a complaint to N. Vasudevan, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Maharashtra Mangrove Cell, which then launched its investigation. On March 23 the investigation revealed the nest adjoining the newly-dug pit, which contained eggshells and 20 dead hatchlings.

Turtle egg shells. Photo by Afroz Shah.

"The question of not sighting the mother turtle is very relevant," Vasudevan admitted

"In the dead of night, when a turtle lays its eggs and covers them up, it requires an experienced eye to notice its tracks."

He added, "it is a fantastic development. *Methi* was grown over the undetected nest. We discovered the empty egg shells the next day. The hatchlings were looking for a route to the sea and crawled sideways into the adjacent pit, from where people helped them out. We have not cordoned off the area but are keeping a watch. These may have been happening on a regular basis and we may have missed out on sighting them. Turtles normally lay eggs in October, which hatch in early January, two months later. Sometimes, this gets delayed."

Vulnerable according to the IUCN

Sunjoy Monga, a naturalist and top Mumbai wildlife photographer, was also sceptical initially and wondered how the nest could have gone unnoticed in the sand. He also noted that the previous sighting in 1978 was based on hearsay by local people, not on any scientific study.

"Fishermen have been sporadically reporting dead turtles from Colaba in the south of the city to Virar in the north," he said

"These marine turtles are pretty long-lived, though not as much as tortoises. I think this is a stray case, a one-off incident."

[Citizen volunteers rescuing Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings at Versova beach in Mumbai. Photo by Afroz Shah.](#)

The Olive Ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), also known as the Pacific Ridley sea turtle, are the smallest and most abundant of all sea turtles found in the world, and are found in warm tropical waters, primarily in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Even so, they are listed as Vulnerable in the IUCN Red list and have declined by 30 per cent from highest recorded levels. They are also protected under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972.

The Odisha coast is the world's largest mass nesting site, known internationally as the 'Arribada', for the Olive Ridley. The Gahirmatha Beach in Kendrapara district, now a part of the Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, is their single largest breeding ground. The numbers recorded in Odisha are followed by the coasts of Mexico and Costa Rica.

Last month, a staggering 428,000 turtles nested at the Rushikulya rookery coast in Ganjam district of Odisha – said to be an all-time record for mass nesting. This was expected to continue for two to three days.

[Citizens rescued their beach from filth](#)

It is entirely possible that it is only due to the regular clean-up of this beach that the turtles have returned. Starting in October 2015, Shah began a clean-up of the 2.5-km-long Versova beach, opposite where he lives, on Sunday mornings.

The beach resembled an open dumping yard, with literally mounds of plastic and other rubbish obliterating the sand. The Brihanmumbai (Greater Mumbai) Municipal Corporation (BMC) did little or nothing to dispose of the trash on the beach. He was joined by his 84-year-old neighbour and gradually by many other residents in his vicinity.

By today, 127 weeks since he began, his organization, Versova Residents' Volunteers, has picked up 9 million tonnes of trash, the biggest such clean-up in the world conducted by volunteers. The movement first addressed upper middle class residents like him where it spread awareness to not litter the beach with plastic and other waste. It then spread to approaching the nearby fisher folks' colonies to clean up their act.

Later, Shah and his strong band began to clean up the municipal public toilets along the beach, again against the backdrop of the BMC's lethargy in doing so. In 2016, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) awarded Shah its top award – Champions of the Earth – at Cancun, Mexico, for spearheading the largest beach clean-up in history. His 1,200 volunteers now work tirelessly every Saturday and Sunday, wading through mini-mountains of dirty, stinky waste.

The first walk of a hatchling. Photo by Afroz Shah.

Biswajit Mohanty, an Odisha-based leading turtle conservationist and former member of the National Board for Wildlife, agrees that the clean-up of the beach may have led to the happy denouement. "I can understand why all Mumbaikars are in a state of high excitement," he told Mongabay-India.

"The average life of an Olive Ridley is 55-60 years. There have been sporadic sightings all over the country, even in Gujarat. Unless there is strict monitoring, no one may know about these nests.

"The turtles mate in the sea and the females come to shore to nest beyond the high-tide line. They return to the ocean immediately after laying their eggs. Their tracks may be blown away by winds and the hatchlings eaten by predators."

Ignored presence?

Sumedha Korgaonkar, who is doing her PhD under the Wildlife Institute of India on Olive Ridleys in Maharashtra, set the record straight. "For me, this is not big news of a sighting for the first time," she observed. "It is a common misconception to imagine that these creatures are shy and deterred by human activities along the coast. We may have ignored their presence because hatchlings usually emerge at night, beyond the high-tide line.

"Beaches in Maharashtra are getting narrower due to erosion and other manmade factors, so they may lay eggs in a low-tide area, which get washed away with a full tide.

"Citizens' groups and NGOs should make people aware of the turtles' habits—their tracks and so on – and report these to the Forest Department. They may well find a larger number of nests.

"The majority of these females on the west coast suffer from infertility and nest in smaller numbers. They are not loyal to the beaches where they are born."

First published by

Mongabay