



The village for turtles



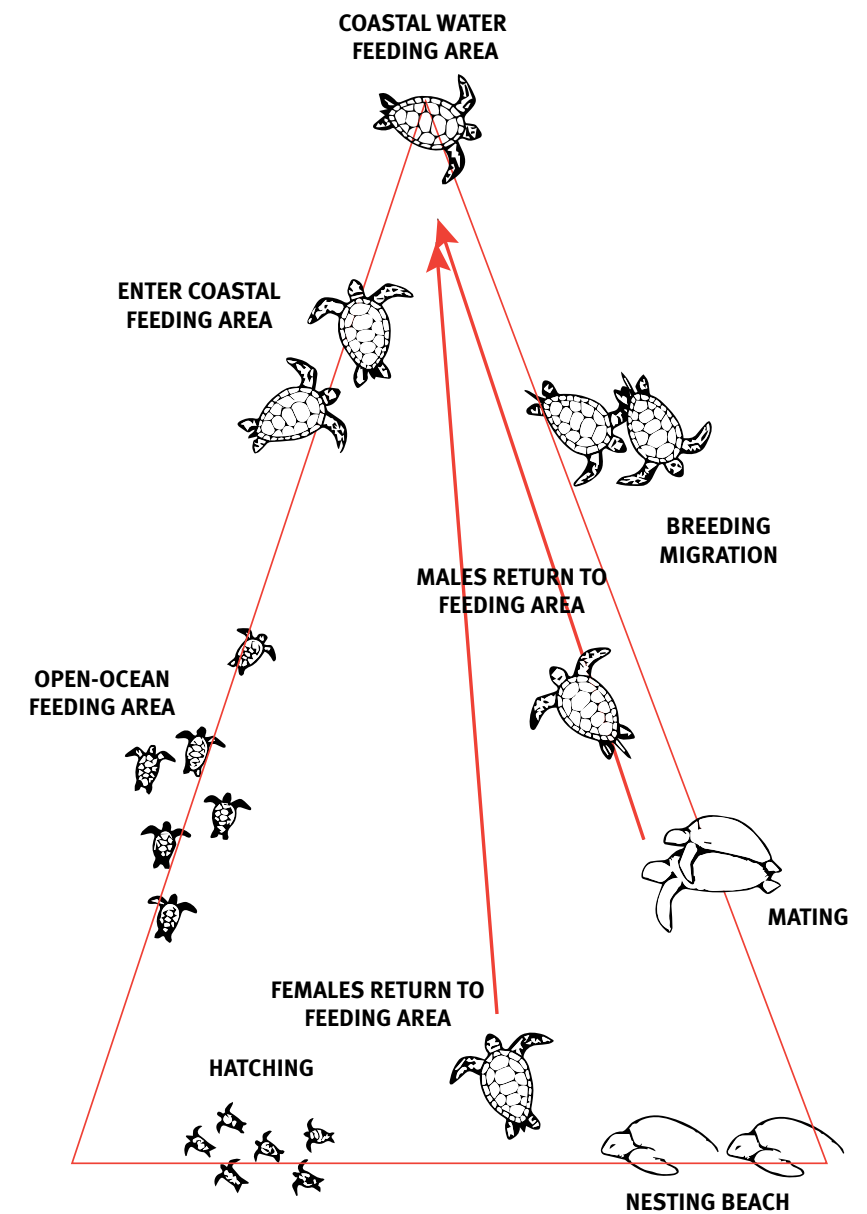
When I think of the village of Velas, the image conjured up is of 'a home away from home'. Velas is a cosy coastal village in Maharashtra on the shores of the Arabian Sea. Dirt roads lead you to the handful modest but well-kept houses, with clay roof tiles, spacious porticos and backyards filled with coconut, areca nut and jackfruit trees. All of this simply gives the village a special charm and character.

The only means of accommodation in the village is homestays. As we reached our host Sunil's place after a gruelling road journey, we immediately realised that it was well worth all the pain in the back. Sunil and his wife, Sunita, were always smiling and spreading happiness and we soon realised that almost everyone in the village is busy doing just that. We went from tired and achy to relaxed and content in a matter of a few minutes!

Devouring delectable Konkani cuisine, such as *pooran-polis* – sweet, flat bread made with wheat, horse gram and jaggery – with coconut milk, vegetable preparations made from absolutely fresh produce, cashewnut curry with *bhakris* – bread made from rice flour – *poha* (flattened rice), *kokum* juice and fresh and healthy *neera* (palm nectar), resting on the porch and enjoying the warm, salty breeze, while watching the cattle go about their business and listening to the music of the waves at a distance were my two favourite activities here.



Life stages of turtles



Sea turtles all around the world are threatened by various human activities. Travel with our author to a small hamlet, Velas, on the coast of Maharashtra, where the village residents have taken it upon themselves to protect the nesting sea turtles through tourism and awareness.

Text: Mamta Naidu





BABY STEPS OF THE BABY TURTLES

Owing to the turtle festival during the turtle nesting and hatching season, there are more tourists in the village than villagers! Turtles have been around for almost 110 million years; they have seen dinosaurs live and perish. What fascinates me the most about sea turtles, besides their long run on our planet, is that they faithfully return to the same site where they were born to nest; how they manage to navigate long distances and return to the same beach is still a mystery to science. The Earth's magnetic field might be assisting them, according to some scientists. Having said that, it is interesting to





TRAVELLING TIPS TO VELAS

One can drive to Velas from both Pune and Mumbai; both these cities are well-connected to most major cities in the country. Travelling in your own car would be extremely beneficial as you will not have to stick to anybody else's schedule and can take halts at will. Alternately, you can take a state transport bus from Pune. The ticket would range between ₹250 to 400.

There are no hotels in Velas. The only staying options are homestays. Sahyadri Nirarg Mitra (the NGO) can help you in the organisation of these home stays.

Food available in the village will be Konkani-style vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes.

Daily at 6:00 am and 6:00 pm, the Olive ridley sea turtle hatchery is open to visitors. Volunteers at the hatchery provide you with information on the turtles. If you are lucky, and there are some eggs hatching when you visit the hatchery, you can see them being released into the sea.

know that only females return to their birth sites, as only females need to lay eggs. Males, after having left their nest once, almost never return back to land. Nesting mostly happens at night during the winter months. Most females nest twice during the nesting season, but some may even nest up to 10 times in one season. Each clutch can have between 80 to 120 eggs. An interesting fact I learned during my trip to Velas was that contrary to popular belief, sea turtles do not go into a state of trance while laying eggs and are known to quit the process of nesting midway if harassed or if they feel threatened.

The species of sea turtle that visits the coast of Velas (and almost all suitable beaches on India's coastline) is commonly called Olive ridley sea turtle (and scientifically *Lepidochelys olivacea*). The hatching usually begins 80-90 days after the eggs have been laid. Ensuring the safety of the nests and protecting the hatchlings till they enter the sea is a duty taken up by the residents of this village. Like all other sea turtle species, the Olive ridley also faces a lot of threats in the form of unintentional killings by fishermen's nets and boats, as well as poaching of both adults and eggs and destruction of nesting sites due to anthropogenic activities. The turtle is, thus, listed as Vulnerable in the IUCN Red List. Even during their short journey from the nest to the ocean, the young turtles face a lot of challenges, such as dehydration, predators and losing

their way and eventually dying of starvation. The ocean throws up even bigger threats in the form of numerous predators and garbage, which these turtles swallow and die. But the sea turtles do a lot of good for the beaches they nest on. While coming out to nest, the sea turtles bring in a lot of nutrients far away from the high-tide mark, thus allowing several animals and plants to use them up. Several animals also feed on the eggs and hatchlings of the sea turtle.

HELPING HAND

After noticing the dwindling numbers of the sea turtles returning to the shore every year, Sahyadri Nisarg Mitra (a NGO), with help of locals and the forest department, took it upon themselves to protect these turtle nests and spread awareness about the species.

Watching the adorable bale of young Olive ridley sea turtles painstakingly dig themselves out of the nest and shakily crawl towards the ocean, some even in the wrong direction, made me wonder if they would even make it on their own in the oceanic world. The whole experience made me realise how lucky we humans were to constantly have a helping hand in our lives and made me grow kinder and more considerate towards the most important people in my life. As for Velas, I would definitely be back to visit the inspiring place again soon.

