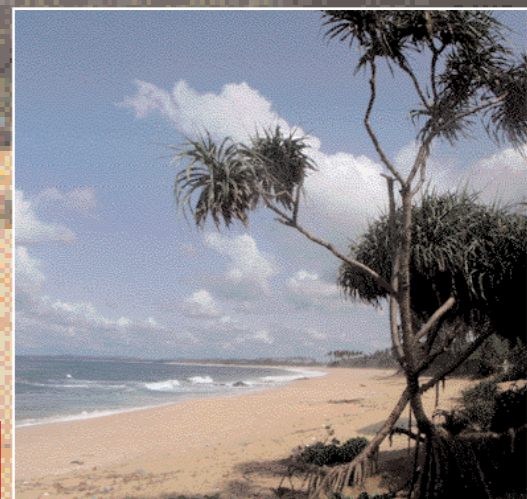


Life in Rekawa



Sri Lanka's First Marine Turtle Sanctuary

The blissful and unspoilt beach of Rekawa

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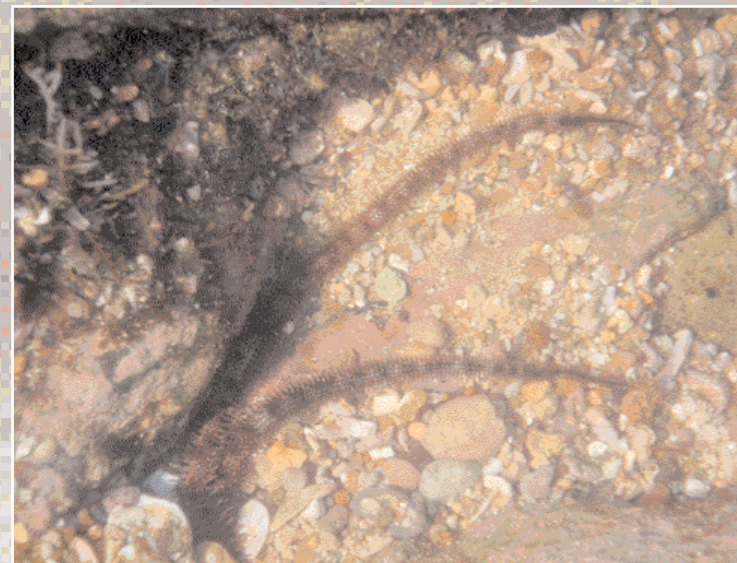
Hawksbill hatchlings



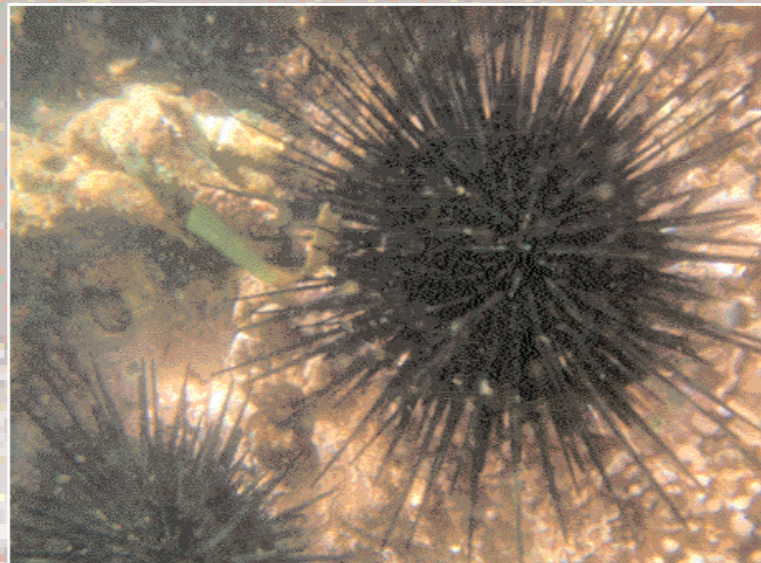
A Green Turtle busy digging her nest at night

A sea turtle makes her way to the golden beach of Rekawa by cutting deep turtle tracks. Under the moonlit night, she finds an ideal nesting spot. She then flicks her front flippers to make a 'body pit' and by using her hind flippers, and gently carves an egg-shaped chamber to lay her eggs. An adult turtle can deposit upto 200 eggs because the slim chances of a few hatchlings surviving is a matter of the 'survival of the fittest'. Sri Lanka is home to five out of seven turtle species that are namely Green Turtle, Olive Ridley, Loggerhead and the Hawksbill Turtle.

The village of Rekawa is situated about six kilometres from Tangalle and perhaps due to the good 'karma' of the Rekawa people wasn't badly affected by the tsunami. Years ago however, it was a common sight to see these same people engage in illegal activities that led to the reduction of the turtle population. The Principal of the Rekawa Kanishta Vidyalaya S. P. Vinitha talked about the transformation of Rekawa "The people of Rekawa used to steal turtle eggs and kill turtles for consumption. They used to mine corals and cut mangroves that made the turtles an endangered species". Having seen the changes in the school for over 20 years, she said that former students did engage in such malpractices for they weren't trained in choosing different career paths. Says Thushan Kapurusinghe the head of the Turtle Conservation Project (TCP) that has been helping the turtles of Rekawa by uplifting the Rekawa community "Despite the laws enforced, the only answer was offering an alternative livelihood for the people of Rekawa".



Brittlestars - A kind of starfish



A black prick urchin

Rehabilitating the town of Rekawa to give them alternative careers was essential in protecting and conserving the turtles. The former turtle nest poachers have now reformed into the turtle nest protectors. Says nest protector Shantha Weerawanna, "It is our duty to protect the turtle nests from other predators and even though the market is there, there is less demand for turtle consumption by people mainly the tourists". The Sri Lanka Tourist Board together with the TCP have provided training to these people to develop themselves as tour guides. He says "I realised that it isn't ethical because as a Buddhist, it is wrong to hurt these harmless animals". Today, they educate tourists about the turtles and help them understand the turtle nesting process. The turtle nest protectors have formed their own association called the 'Nature Friends of Rekawa'.

Other members of the Rekawa community like the famous Rekawa women divers who have been mining corals illegally have been rehabilitated into forming the Community Batik Group. Many others who have discovered their creativity have started producing Coir products, forming the Community Coir Group. Moreover, the tailoring group have also helped out. The fish farming group have gone to the extent of breeding fish to cater to the markets not only in Colombo but also in Matara and Galle.



The tailoring group making their creations



Sea grass beds that the turtles feed on

Thushan Kapurusinghe says "We have created an emblem of identity of Rekawa with the turtle by painting bus stops around the town in turtle decor and asking the creative groups to create more turtle-oriented works of art". Today, the TCP educates and creates awareness for the students at the Rekawa Kanishta Vidyalaya and the preschool nearby by teaching them that turtles need to be loved and protected. These children clean the beaches and perform drama and sing songs about the harmonious nature of turtles.

In addition to this, the environment of Rekawa is also evidently beautiful with the Rekawa lagoon being home to endemic mangrove species. A spectacular variety of underwater flora and fauna like corals, sea anemones, crustaceans, cacti and exotic natural creations can be witnessed by the visitors.

The Department of Wildlife (DWC) and the Coast Conservation Department (CCD) have enforced law by declaring the Rekawa beach as Sri Lanka's first marine turtle sanctuary. They have been supportive of the 'Community-based Ecosystem Conservation Approach' (CBECA) adopted by the Turtle Conservation Project in order to protect the turtles and develop the village of Rekawa.

SCOTIA-USAID, UNDP GEF SGP, MercyCorps, Marine Conservation Society, UN Volunteer Program, BBC Saving Planet Earth and AdoptSriLanka have immensely helped the TCP project be a success.



The Community Coir Group with their works of art



The Community Batik Group busy at work



The beautiful Rekawa Lagoon