

## ***Impact of Long-Term Fisher Awareness Programs on Sea Turtle Conservation in Kalpitiya, Sri Lanka***

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Fishery bycatch is one of the most significant yet possibly least understood threats to the sea turtle populations in Sri Lanka. During the past 10 years, the Bio Conservation Society (BCS), Sri Lanka has conducted over 50 awareness programs in the Kalpitiya Divisional Secretariat Division (DSD) with a primary objective of promoting awareness of sea turtle biology and conservation, legislation, and law enforcement among coastal populations. This study assessed the impact of these long-term fisher awareness programs on sea turtle conservation in Kalpitiya DSD. A questionnaire survey was conducted in 12 fishing villages in Kalpitiya, involving 100 fishers, both participants and non-participants of the awareness programs between May to September 2023. During the survey, the participants were asked a series of questions covered their demographic information, fishing activities, and knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding sea turtle bycatch. According to the results of the Pearson Chi-square test awareness programs had a significant positive influence on the knowledge ( $p < 0.001$ ) and attitudes ( $p < 0.001$ ) towards sea turtle conservation among the participants. Participants were more knowledgeable about the turtle species, their biology, 210otmains for bycatch and about the legal framework for their conservation and had more positive attitudes on the importance on reducing turtle bycatch and conserving them than the non-participants. Fisher's Exact test indicated that awareness programs did not result in significant changes in the fishing practices ( $p > 0.001$ ) such as changing the gear type or the fishing strategies to reduce sea turtle bycatch. Fishermen's reluctance to adopt new methods stemmed partly from poverty concerns and fear of decreased harvests. To enhance the efficacy of future awareness programs, it can be recommended to integrate practical conservation techniques that align with fishermen's economic interests, such as demonstrating cost-effective, sustainable fishing methods that protect sea turtles without compromising their livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Sea Turtle Bycatch, Questionnaire Survey, Sea Turtle Conservation, Knowledge, Attitudes, Fishing Practices