

ROLE OF SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION CENTERS TO PROTECT ENDANGERED TURTLE SPECIES IN SRI LANKA

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The current studies of sea turtles indicate that the turtle population is rapidly decreasing due to many human activities that are leading to their extinction. Turtle consumption, illegal sea turtle selling, commercial fishing, artificial lighting, coastal protection such as sea walls, rock revetments and sandbags, marine debris-ingestion and entanglement and other beach activities such as cabanas, umbrellas, canoes and small boats are some human activities that have led to turtle extinction. Many laws and legal actions prohibiting the consumption of turtle meat and eggs have already been implemented all over the world. The establishment of Sea Turtle Conservation Centers along the beach is one of the actions taken to affirm the existence of these endangered species in Sri Lanka. The objective of this study was to find out the contribution of sea turtle conservation centers to protect endangered sea turtles. The survey was conducted by selecting three turtle conservation centers situated in the southwestern coastline. A qualitative research approach was followed to understand the current practices on turtle conservation. Especially, semi-structured interviews were carried out with owners and workers of the conservation centers. It was revealed that these turtle conservation centers are legally conducted with a permit from the Department of Wildlife. The workers of a conservation center record all details such as the number of incubated eggs, new born baby turtles and turtles released to the sea. The details are handed over to the National Aquatic Resource Research and Development Agency monthly. Further, activities such as consumption of turtle for meat, selling eggs for food have decreased in considerable numbers after initiating these turtle conservation centers. In addition, many injured sea turtles are also looked after by these conservation centers. When visitors are considered, foreign tourists are willing to participate in volunteer activities rather than local visitors in activities such as cleaning hatcheries, feeding turtles, hatchery tours and turtle release. The study concludes that these sea turtle conservation centers play a pivotal role in preservation, turtle caring and knowledge sharing centers and also as places that give very enjoyable experiences with marine creatures. Although these conservation centers contribute to the existence of turtles in a very valuable way, the government does not provide any kind of support to this process. Therefore, the government should be involved in these programs in a positive way to further reduce illegal turtle consumption to assure the existence and sustainment of these ancient marine creatures.

Keywords: Endangered turtle species, Sea turtles, Conservation centers