Division Column

The Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) – an Unusual Sea Turtle Recorded in Hong Kong

Ka-shing Cheung and Pamela Y.M. Wan
Wetland and Fauna Conservation Division

On 1 June 2005, a sea turtle carcass weighing 32 kg was found on a rocky beach within Ocean Park, Hong Kong (Fig. 34). The relatively large head, as well as the elevated and almost round carapace immediately revealed its unusual identity. It was an Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea* 欖蠵龜) as revealed from its asymmetrical coastal scute numbers and the presence of openings of Rathke's glands on the plastron.

Further examination revealed that this female turtle measured 60.5 cm in straight carapace length and 57 cm in straight carapace width; its almost equal length and width explained its round appearance. The body was in a relatively good overall condition although it had begun to distend and to smell. There were green algae growing on the carapace but no other epibiota. No apparent fatal wound was detected. This Olive Ridley had only one claw on each front flipper, suggesting the loss of secondary claws that has been observed in some adults.

Dr. Nimal Fernando undertook a post-mortem examination in Ocean Park's laboratory (Fig. 35). Food slurry was found along the digestive track, which included some partially digested filamentous algae in the oesophagus and stomach. This discovery was consistent with what is known about Olive Ridley's omnivorous diet in which algae are eaten as occasional snacks. A few nylon threads were recovered from the oesophagus, stomach and small intestine but no hooks were found. The autopsy could not come up with a definite cause of death for this particular Olive Ridley.

Rated as endangered under the IUCN Red List, the Olive Ridley is considered the most abundant sea turtle in the world with major distribution in the tropical waters of the Pacific, India and South Atlantic Oceans. It is also known for its nesting behaviour – "Arribada" – an extraordinary feature of certain nesting populations in India, Mexico and some Central American countries in which hundreds or even thousands of females aggregate for nesting on the same beach over a few days. Another unusual feature of the Olive Ridley is that nesting takes place both in the daytime and at night.

In Hong Kong, there are less than 10 records of the Olive Ridley. The last one was found in 1996. Since the species is not known to nest in Hong Kong or nearby regions, the Olive Ridley probably died on the way to her natal beach for mating and nesting. The current post-mortem study enriches our understanding of sea turtles found in Hong Kong.

Note: Five species of sea turtle out of a total of seven have been recorded in Hong Kong waters. They are the Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas* 綠海龜), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata* 玳瑁), Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea* 棱皮龜), Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta* 赤蠵龜), and Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea* 欖蠵龜), among them only the Green Turtle is better known for its regular nesting at Sham Wan, Lamma Island. As for the remaining two species, i.e. Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii* 肯普氏龜) in the Gulf of Mexico and Flatback (*Natator depressus* 平背龜) in Australian waters, their major ranges of distribution are very far away from Hong Kong.

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Fig 34. The overall view of the Olive Ridley. Note the doomed carapace.

Fig 35. Post-mortem dissection in actions. The job requires patience and enthusiasm.