

Walk on nature's wild side every week through stories and fun activities.

The moonlight calls to me

A chance meeting with a turtle on the beach taught Raju many valuable lessons about these creatures of the deep

**Written by Prachi Galange
Concept by Nikita Pimple**

Raju was distraught when he reached the dark Velas beach. He had an argument with his mother about wanting an expensive toy. Angry and crying, he stormed out without dinner towards the beach.

Raju started scouring the beach for food in the little light that came from the village. He found some torn fishnet, frayed rope, lots of plastic bags, bottles, fish bones and scales, rotten fish heads, crab shells, tiny fish that even the crows wouldn't eat, and a lot of other rubbish. And as he walked his foot hit against something. He just plopped down and let out the loudest cry he could manage. His anger had dissipated and now all he could think of was his warm home, hot food and his mother's loving hug. Big drops of tears fell down his face as he felt

something cold touch his hand and even as a warm voice asked him, "What happened human child, why do you cry so loudly, are you lost?"

He was startled and very surprised when he saw who was talking to him. It was a turtle! Its back was mossy green with a lot of scars, as if it had been in a lot of fights. Finding a kindred spirit, he immediately answered, "I miss my mother, I miss my home, I am hungry, thirsty and tired." "Poor dear, don't cry, I am sure your mother is very worried for you and even now is frantically looking for you." By now Raju had got over his fear. He grew curious to know more about the turtle and what it was doing on the beach at such an unearthly hour.

What are you doing on the beach so late in the night brother tortoise? He asked. "I am not a tortoise, I am a turtle. Can't you see that I have flippers? And I am



An Olive Ridley coming to the shore to nest. PHOTO: AFP

not brother, I am mother Olive Ridley Turtle. I am here to lay eggs on this new moon night. If you'll excuse me, I need to continue my work as I don't have much time."

Raju saw a shallow tear drop shaped pit and five white round

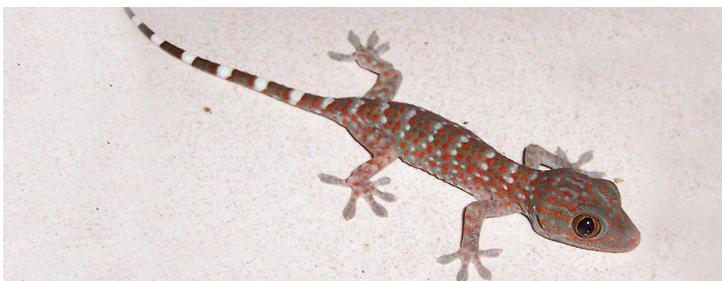
eggs in it. The eggs reminded him of golf balls but unlike them these were very smooth and leathery. He grew even more curious as he wondered how the turtle could have made the pit since she had no hands. "But who dug this pit for you? Did one of the fishermen

help? He asked. "No my child, I dug them with my back flippers, and threw out all the loose sand while I went around it to make it deep. It was hard work but I have to do it for my children. Even your mother must be taking a lot of effort to take care of you."

BE AN EXPLORER Try these activities that will expand your knowledge of the animal kingdom

Circle the reptiles

(Hint: Reptiles do not need water to complete their lifecycle. Whereas amphibians need water to complete their lifecycle)



PHOTOS: AFP AND WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Saying this she started closing the pit by putting in soil again. It was a laborious process as she slowly and painstakingly pushed the sand into the pit, and after it filled up she used her stomach to smooth it out. Soon there was no sign of a pit at all and Raju felt very surprised to see how skillfully she had completed her work in spite of having just flippers. "This is my birthplace and I have been coming here for many years to lay eggs. But I must take your leave now, the ocean is my true home.

But you are leaving them all alone! What will happen when they hatch? Who will feed them? Will you come back to show them the way?" Raju asked.

Mother turtle said, "My children will hatch in two months and they will follow the full moonlight which will guide them

towards the ocean. Many of them will be eaten by crabs, birds and even stray dogs before they enter the water. Even in water they will not be safe as there are many fish who would like a tasty morsel. Only one in a thousand turtle hatchlings will survive, but this is the law of nature. And this is why we turtles lay so many eggs at once, so at least a few may survive." And, lo and behold, Raju saw hundreds of turtles heading back to the sea after laying eggs.

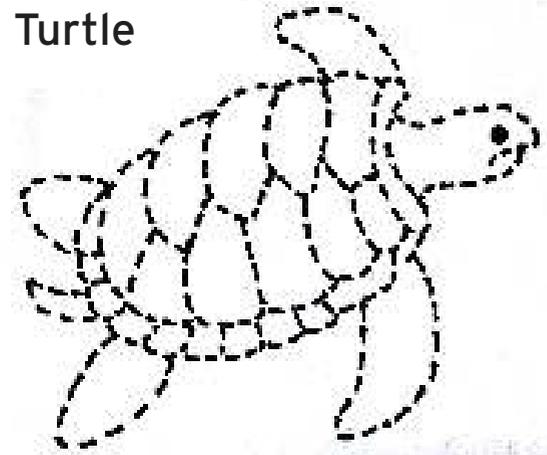
She continued, "They will have to learn quickly to feed on their own and fend for themselves. Nowadays, they also have to learn to differentiate between a plastic bag and a jellyfish which is our food. They look so alike in the water! Please ask your friends and family not to throw plastic in the ocean as we get very confused."

Raju grew thoughtful, the turtle hatchlings had such a tough life ahead of them, whereas his parents were there to take care of him and his needs for so long. He bid a fond goodbye to mother turtle as he walked back home to his own mother.

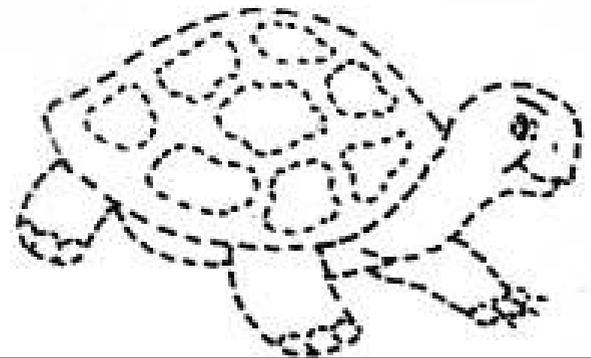
Raju was a changed boy now and his mother couldn't be happier. He took part in a beach clean-up, made sure that all his friends and family recycled plastic and never ever threw it in the ocean. Two months later, Raju was back on the same beach on a full moon night. This time he was not alone but had come with his parents and friends. They all watched from a safe distance as the turtle hatchlings emerged from their sand nests and scrambled towards the ocean in a hurry. The moonlight guided them to their true home.

Trace the picture and colour inside the lines

Turtle



Tortoise



Help the turtle hatchling reach the sea

