

The Statesman

SECTION 2

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Living on the *fringes*

The sea water had started receding due to low tide when I reached the beach area of Mithapur, on the Saurashtra coast of Gujarat, early in the morning. Moving into the shallow waters, which came up to my thighs, for about a hundred feet, I walked through the coral reef and stood on the fringe of a tide pool, as an entire world of colourful creatures seemed to come alive.

Visiting the Saurashtra coast, it was suggested that I visit the coral reefs in the Jamnagar and Mithapur area. These areas, specially the Mithapur region, I was told, has a very rich and virgin coral life in the reef area very close to the shore and was accessible at low tides.

When I reached Mithapur I was met with the heartening news that the next morning was a low tide day and that the corals will be more than 50 per cent exposed.

Mithapur, incidentally, is a small town where the Tata Chemicals Ltd (TCL) has its chemical production plant. Tata Chemicals, in association with Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), has undertaken research work and protection of this coral reef that is teeming with marine biodiversity.

A magnificent world of corals opened up for Pradeep Chamaria, as he explored the reef area off the coast of Saurashtra at low tide

Battling odds

Mithapur corals were a neglected lot till some time back and the coral population was on a decline due to the fishing activities along the Mithapur coast. Often fishing nets get entangled on the coral formations and since it is difficult to remove them, they are abandoned by the fisher folk. They not only disturbed the coral growth but also proved to be virtual death traps for marine creatures and at times also the endangered marine turtles. Mithapur coast, I was told, is a regular nesting site for the Olive Ridley and the Green turtles.

TCL has taken an initiative to overcome this problem and has banned all kinds of fishing activities near the reef. It has also launched an extensive cleaning programme of the area to remove damaged nets. The result of these initiatives are already visible and the steady growth and sighting of new corals support these claims.

It was literally a race against time for me in the reef. I had entered the reef with the receding tide and had toiled hard to stay steady in the shallow waters. I had to be very careful of the marine creatures, especially the crabs, as these crustaceans are delicate creatures and a drop in guard would also mean inviting a sharp nip from their vice-like pincers. It was only about an hour during which I enjoyed the company of the wonderful corals, when the tides turned and waters started rising. I had to bid a reluctant goodbye to the magnificent corals as I hurried out of the sea.

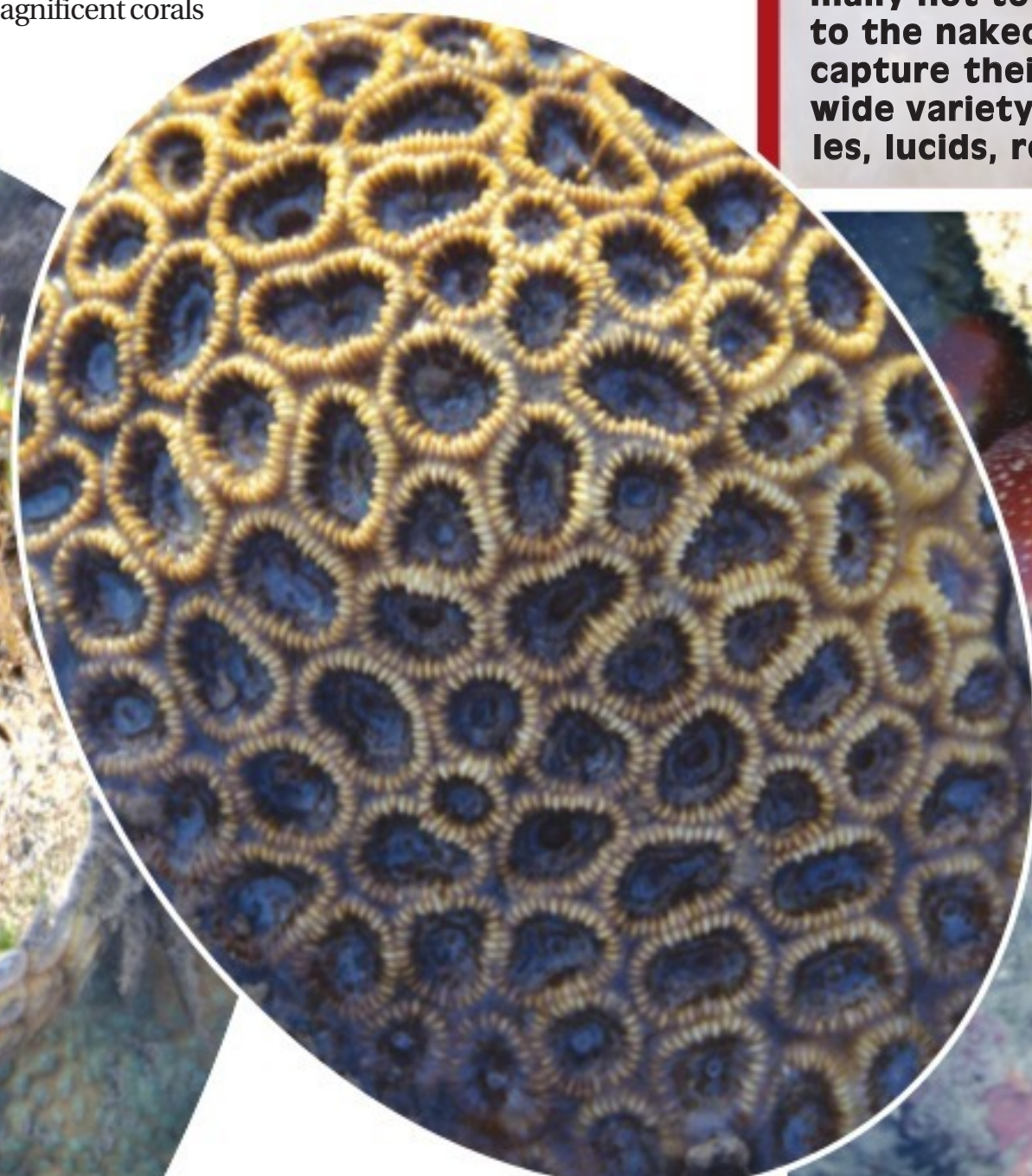
A rich haul

I was briefed by Satish from TCL that the fringing reef at Mithapur harbours six different types of hard corals, including brain coral, star coral, moon corals, plate coral, porities coral and staghorn coral. The place also offered a great opportunity to observe marine life associated with the live corals. The total area of the reef is about 3 sq km.

As I waded in, I came across the first moon coral, said to be the major inhabitant of this area. Soon I could see a variety of crabs in different shades, eels, octopus and small coloured fish moving through the maze of coral formations. I could even spot a sting ray lying buried in the sandy bottom ready to strike me if I dared to venture near it.

The timid sea hare was resting under a few corals. Satish informed me that it was a very harmless creature and so I tried picking it up. It was a slippery lump of flesh and I placed it on an algae formation in the sea bed to capture it on my camera. But it soon bundled out in a small lump of spotted dirty green mass and somehow got mixed with the algae. I had an idea that this creature has unique self defence techniques and very soon I saw some kind of bluish violet discharge coming out of the hare. That was when I was informed that the sea hare will squirt ink when disturbed to frighten its enemies.

A prized possession of this reef is a colony of rare bonellias, which are normally not to be seen living collectively. Unfortunately, while they were visible to the naked eye, as they were a little deep in the sea water, I was unable to capture their magnificent colour and texture on my camera. I also spotted a wide variety of shells ~ cowries, spires, augers, tusk shell, murex, conch, cockles, lucids, rock oysters, limpets, snails and top shells to name a few.



Some of the corals found at Mithapur

- Porites Coral (Porites compressa)
- Plate Coral (Montipora sp)
- Moon Coral (Favia sp)
- Star Coral (Siderastrea savignayana)
- Leptoria Phrygia
- Astreocora sp

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