

Jul. 2004: Supreme Court appointed Central Empowered Committee says: “The present site (Dhamra) will seriously impact Gahirmatha’s nesting turtles and could lead to the beach being abandoned by the marine creatures. It is therefore necessary that an alternative site is located for this port.”

Aug. 2004: Korean Steel Major Posco and Australian mining company BHP-Billiton express interest in an integrated iron ore mining, steel plant and Dhamra port construction project with proposed investment of Rs. 39,000 crores.

Sep. 2004: International campaign to save Dhamra gathers steam.

Oct. 2004: Tata Steel and L&T sign agreement for construction of Dhamra port.

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Operation Kachhapa & the Sea Turtles of Orissa

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The olive ridley in Orissa

The olive ridley turtle is known for its spectacular mass nesting behaviour. There are only three places in the world where this unique natural phenomenon - known as an *arribada* (Spanish for ‘arrival’) - occurs. One of them is in the state of Orissa on India’s eastern coast. But over the past decade the turtles have been facing increasing pressures off the coast of Orissa. Illegal trawling and gill netting has devastated their populations. While traditional fishing methods pose little problem to the turtles, large mechanised fishing vessels dragging trawl nets behind them trap and drown tens of thousands of turtles as they congregate offshore to mate. Large-scale development projects – such as the construction of a mega port, and offshore drilling for natural gas – situated in the turtle’s congregation areas and migration paths are creating increasing pressure for the sea turtles of Orissa.

Operation Kachhapa

To reduce turtle mortality and safeguard the future of the species, the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) launched “Operation Kachhapa” (OpK) in 1998. The programme is run in partnership

with the Wildlife Society of Orissa (WSO) and the Orissa Forest Department. Operation Kachhapa (*kachhapa* is the Oriya word for turtle) has successfully built up a public image for sea turtle conservation in Orissa. The programme’s main objectives are prevention of mortality by improving patrolling of illegal fishing zones, collecting data on turtle mortality and illegal fishing, building public support for turtle conservation, and fighting legal battles in court.

OpK assisted enforcement agencies by hiring sea-going patrol boats, providing equipment and support to patrol staff, and by serving as a co-ordination centre for the various enforcement agencies involved in turtle protection. OpK field staff also carry out turtle mortality counts outside the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary and provide the authorities with information on illegal trawler movement, illegal night fishing and gill netting. These time-consuming tasks involve walking and cycling along vast stretches of the coastline.

OpK receives immense support from the national and state media. It informs the media about mortality, nesting and hatching events, offshore mating and casualties. As a result of this continuous liaisoning, the mortality of the olive ridley along Orissa’s shores

has dominated the news for the past six years, leading to growing public concern. OpK also runs a Turtle Interpretation Centre, which is aimed at school children, in the state capital of Bhubaneswar, and is the main source of information on sea turtle activity in Orissa.

As part of its awareness programme, 'wandering minstrels' trained by OpK travel to fishing villages along the coast and present song, dance and storytelling shows highlighting turtle conservation issues, the ecological significance of the olive ridley, and how traditional fishing communities can use existing laws to protect their livelihoods. They have performed in over 150 villages in Ganjam, Puri and Jagatsinghpur districts. They also put up posters and banners about turtle conservation issues along their travels.

Legal Case

Implementation of marine fishing regulations would ensure the survival of the sea turtles as well as traditional fishermen. However, the regulations are openly flouted by large mechanised trawlers and gill netters, with devastating consequences for the turtles, as well as traditional fishermen who are unable to compete with these boats and lose their catch to them. WPSI and the Wildlife Society of Orissa had originally filed a case in the High Court in Orissa asking, among other things, for the implementation of existing fishing regulations. However, the mechanised fishing boat owners are a large and politically influential body in Orissa, and this slowed the case down. Though there were a series of court orders to implement the law, the state government dragged its feet.

Meanwhile, Mr. Alok Krishna Agarwal, a turtle lover and an advocate of the Supreme Court of India, filed a case with the Central Empowered Committee (CEC), which has been set up by the Supreme Court of India specifically to look into, and speedily decide on, environmental matters. The CEC has shown keen interest in the case. In March 2003, after a site visit to Orissa, it passed 13 interim directions to the State of Orissa asking them to implement various measures for the protection of turtles including purchase or hire of patrol boats, police protection for patrol staff, support facilities, forest department camps, coast guard patrols, etc to beef up the turtle protection

measures. Further, the CEC also passed orders asking the department to involve local fishermen in turtle protection measures. In April 2004, the CEC issued further recommendations on turtle protection activities.

Dhamra Port

The construction of a large port has been proposed on the mouth of the Dhamra River, adjoining Bhitarkanika National Park. The site is 7 km north of the nesting beaches on Nasi I and II islands, and 10 km north of the nesting site in Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary. This area contains the world's largest population of the olive ridley. Large congregations of breeding turtles are found at the entry channel to the proposed port in front of the Dhamra River. Heavy shipping traffic – including cargo ships with as much as 120,000 DWT capacities – will cut through turtle congregations. Light and chemical pollution is inevitable. In addition, there is a further risk of the introduction of exotic species during the discharge of ballast water. The construction of the approach channel (15 km long and 230 m wide) will result in the dredging and dispersion of nearly 40 million cubic metres of ocean floor bed, destroying the benthic fauna that the congregating turtles feed on. However, the CEC in its orders dated 6th April, 2004 has directed the state government to reconsider relocation of the port in view of its likely impact on sea turtles.

Reliance Industries Limited (RIL)

RIL is India's largest private company and it has aggressively pursued oil and natural gas exploration in India and abroad. The Bay of Bengal is reported to be one of the richest reservoirs of hydrocarbons in the world, due to sediments deposited by rivers flowing across the Indian subcontinent. In 2003, WPSI received reports that RIL were planning to carry out exploratory drilling for natural gas off the Orissa coast. A Multi-Disciplinary Expert Group (MEG) was constituted by the Ministry of Environment and Forests to look into the effects of exploratory drilling on the Orissa sea turtles. Operation Kachhapa's Project Co-ordinator is a member of the MEG. However, even while the MEG was deliberating on the issue, RIL went ahead

with its drilling, and announced that it had discovered gas in block NEC-25 in June 2004. This has been brought to the attention of the CEC and a hearing is expected in January, 2005.

OpK's future plans

OpK is carrying on its planned activities though the scale is much lower this year due to a reduced budget. Awareness and education for the local fishermen by the wandering minstrels is being conducted. OpK is also supporting local initiatives by turtle protection clubs and youth groups at Devi and Rushikulya River mouth nesting beaches. Such groups provide much needed data on turtle casualties and fishing activity in the prohibited areas so that these issues can be brought to the attention of the enforcement authorities. Their members also assist the forest department in nest protection and hatchling rescue. Such groups shall be empowered to carry on turtle conservation activities in the future. OpK is in touch with forest, fisheries and coast guard officials to ensure that patrolling is carried out in the prohibited areas to protect the congregating sea turtles.

OpK has joined the recently formed Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium (OMRCC) which is a coalition of turtle scientists, local fishermen unions and conservation groups. This new group has been formed with the initiative of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bangalore and is a first step towards forging a partnership and common platform among different groups who are interested in turtle conservation. OpK is also closely monitoring the implementation of the Supreme Court's orders passed for turtle protection on the Orissa coast. OpK has been made a member of the monitoring committee to be set up by the state government for monitoring the implementation of the Court's orders. Sadly, this committee is yet to be formed. Prodded by the Supreme Court of India in 2003, the government shook off its languor and finally decided to be serious. Last year, due to increased enforcement, the casualties plunged to a level of 7,000, which is half of the average casualties noticed a few years earlier. Though it sounds good, the figures are clearly unacceptably high and OpK is determined to ensure that the number of casualties are brought down.

Profile of NGOS working on sea turtle conservation and fisheries in Orissa

RUSHIKULYA SEA TURTLE PROTECTION COMMITTEE

The Rushikulya Sea Turtle Protection Committee (RSTPC) plays a pivotal role in saving the sea turtles of the Rushikulya rookery. A group of motivated village boys of Purunabandha village, Ganjam, near the Rushikulya sea turtle rookery have formed this group which is a non-government non-profit organisation registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. The group was initiated in 1998 and has a total membership of 50, mostly from fishing communities. The RSTPC works with technical support from many sea turtle biologists including Dr. Bivash Pandav, Dr. S.K. Dutta, Mr. B. C. Choudhury and Mr. Basudev Tripathy.

Over the years, RSTPC and its members have done considerable work on the protection and

conservation of olive ridley turtles at the Rushikulya rookery with minimal funding support. Many of these village boys were actively involved with the Wildlife Institute of India's sea turtle project along the Orissa coast during 1994 – 1999.

Projects undertaken by the RSTPC and supporting agencies:

- Conservation of olive ridley sea turtles along the Orissa coast – supported by *Operation Kachhapa* & *WISO*, Orissa.
- Rescue operation for olive ridley hatchlings at Rushikulya Rookery – Supported by *Wild Orissa*, Bhubaneswar (2003-2004).