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CHANDRASEKHAR KAR (1956-2014)

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When Robert Bustard arrived in Odisha in the 1970s, he set about trying to establish a research programme there on crocodiles and sea turtles, and recruited several Ph.D. students. One such student, Chandrasekhar Kar, would carry out pioneering research on olive ridley turtles in Orissa. Chandrasekhar joined the Forest Department in Orissa as a Research Scholar in 1976. Initially stationed at Nandankanan Zoo, he then decided to shift to Gahirmatha as no one else was willing to work there. Madhab Chandra Dash at Sambalpur University agreed to supervise Chandrasekhar's research formally, with Bustard as a co-guide. Chandrasekhar conducted field work at Gahirmatha between 1977 and 1982, tagging over 10,000 nesting females and amassing huge amounts of data on their nesting biology. Kar's book, co-authored with his supervisor M.C. Dash, "Gahirmatha: A Turtle Paradise" is a detailed account of sea turtles in the region and his work there.

Chandrasekhar worked under extremely taxing conditions for several years. In 1979, his paper with Satish Bhaskar on sea turtles of the eastern Indian Ocean was

presented at the World Conference on Sea Turtle Conservation in Washington DC, USA. It was published in the 'Biology and Conservation of Sea Turtles' (Edited by Karen Bjorndal, 1982) and remains a classic and comprehensive account. Chandrasekhar also discovered a second rookery at the Devi River Mouth in 1981, and along with Bivash Pandav, a third rookery at Rushikulya. He mentored both Bivash and Basudev Tripathy, who made their name as sea turtle biologists in Orissa in the 1990s. He was involved with several research projects on olive ridley turtles in Odisha in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2001, when the very first satellite telemetry project on olive ridley turtles was launched in India, the first turtle fitted with a transmitter was named 'Chandra' in his honour.

When I interviewed Chandrasekhar in 2011 for my book on sea turtle conservation in India, he spoke with great nostalgia about his years at Gahirmatha, and with passion about sea turtle conservation in the state. Chandrasekhar retired from the Orissa Forest Department as Senior Research Officer in February 2014, and passed away suddenly in April of that year.

I LOST MY BEST FRIEND, CHANDRASEKHAR, THE SEA TURTLE BIOLOGIST

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It was April 21, 2014 at 9.30 pm, and my wife and I were in Bangalore when I got a message on my phone from my friend Dr. L.A.K. Singh. "Dr. C.S. Kar passed

away after a fall in bath room at his Burla home. Prof. M.C. Dash has just informed us". The news came as a shock and initially I could not believe it. Soon after,

I got another message from Lala “*We are shocked to learn about this and his body will be taken to Puri for cremation and is expected to reach his residence between 6-7am tomorrow*”. Immediately, I got in touch with our Chief Wildlife Warden, Sri S.S. Srivastav and informed him about the sudden demise of Chandrasekhar. That was a terrible night for me and I couldn’t sleep a wink. My wife and children were equally saddened by this news, as Chandrasekhar was an integral part of my family.

L.A.K. Singh and I joined the Govt. of India/FAO/UNDP Project “Crocodile and Sea Turtle Research and Management’ as researchers in mid-1975 and were stationed at the Bhitarkanika and Satkosia Research centres. Chandrasekhar joined us the following year. He was initially given an assignment by the Chief Wildlife Warden, Sri. G.M. Das, and Dr. H.R. Bustard, FAO/UNDP Chief Technical Advisor, to study the captive breeding of the three Indian crocodilian species at the Nanadankanan Zoological Park. He later moved to Habalikhathi on the Gahirmatha coast to study the ecology and biology of olive ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), since Gahirmatha had just recently been discovered and hailed as one of the world’s largest sea turtle rookeries by Dr. Bustard.

I was involved in a study of estuarine crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) in the Bhitarkanika mangrove ecosystem and was stationed at the saltwater crocodile research and conservation centre, Dangmal, and Chandrasekhar was stationed at the Habalikhathi camp on the coast. Our initial years of research in the harsh conditions of Bhitarkanika and Gahirmatha, in the deltaic area of the rivers Brahmani, Baitarani and Dhamara, was very difficult for both of us since we had to negotiate the tidal rivers and creeks using small row boats and kerosene lanterns through our study period. At the time, we lacked even basic postal and communication facilities in these remote areas.

Even though we were located not too far away from each other in Bhitarkanika, we could not meet frequently. To meet him at his study site at Gahirmatha was difficult as it took several hours to traverse the inner tidal creeks in a row boat. When he visited me at Dangmal we would have a good time together, interacting about our respective research activities and other related subjects. We used to visit Chandabali regularly to attend the monthly review meeting at the Wildlife Division Office.

Chandrasekhar was a very hard working and committed researcher. He was nationally and internationally

renowned for his pioneering research on sea turtles at Gahirmatha, as well as the rest of the Odisha coast. He received his Ph.D. from Sambalpur University for his outstanding research on olive ridley turtles of Odisha coast. He had contributed a chapter (co-authored with Satish Bhaskar) to the “Biology and Conservation of Sea Turtles” which was published by the Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC. He also co-authored the book “Turtle Paradise: Gahirmatha”, much of which was based on his PhD and subsequent research. He co-authored several other books and booklets published by the State Wildlife Headquarters, Bhubaneswar from time to time. He was also a member of IUCN/SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group.

Chandrasekhar and I hail from a region that was previously under the Aul dynasty of undivided Cuttack (now in Kendrapara). His original birthplace was Bari and mine is Aul, and later Chandrasekhar’s parents moved to Kantabanji of Bolangir district of Odisha. Coincidentally, Chandrasekhar and I worked on ancient reptilian species at the same place in the Bhitarkanika Sanctuary. Together, we co-authored several publications and wildlife manuals. Since we both shared the same surname, “Kar”, at times it was confusing for our colleagues and correspondents. There were times, while publishing articles on crocodiles and sea turtles, that our names were misquoted, with Chandras’ name associated with crocodiles and mine with sea turtles.

Chandrasekhar and I also had the opportunity to attend and participate in a number of seminars, workshops, conferences and training programs throughout the country. We used to travel together to participate in conferences and workshops on wildlife, especially for crocodile and sea turtle conservation and research. We both attended the 30th Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation in Goa in 2010. Our last visit together was to Jamnagar, Gujarat, to attend the Turtle Action Group (TAG) meeting in January, 2013 organised by our friend Dr. Kartik Shanker. It was quite memorable to have travelled and stayed together, as well as participated in the TAG meeting and field visit.

The untimely death of my best friend Chandrasekhar is a great loss to the Odisha Forest Department as well as a personal loss to me and my family. Whenever he visited my house, it was always a pleasure to extend my hospitality, to provide food and his mandatory cup of tea without which his meal wouldn’t be complete.

It is hard to believe that Chandrasekhar is no longer with us. I lost a colleague and my best friend.

REMEMBERING CHANDRA: FIELD DAYS AT GAHIRMATHA

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My reaction on hearing the sad news of the sudden passing of Chandrasekhar Kar, the turtle man of Odisha on April 21, 2014, from a common colleague Lala Ashwini Kumar Singh, was that of disbelief and surprise as I had just met with Chandra (as he was known to all) earlier in February before his retirement from the Odisha Forest Department on the February 28, 2014. All of his friends from Odisha in 1977-78 (when Chandra joined the marine turtle project), including L.A.K. Singh and Sudhakar Kar, got in touch and consoled each other while reminiscing the good and bad times we had experienced in our professional journey in the wildlife conservation world. Lala shared the sequence of events, of how Chandra was moved from Sambalpur to Bhubaneswar in a last effort of revival after a cardiac arrest and how his mortal remains were later taken to the seashore of Puri for last rites. All of us felt it was appropriate that he should rest in peace on the sandy shores of Odisha, where he spent much of his time ensuring the survival of the olive ridley turtles and their habitats.

A week later, on April 28, I met his wife at his residence in Bhubaneswar to share the grief and sorrow of losing someone so dear to us, and I felt his presence while surrounded by all the books, papers and journals that he had so carefully collected during his life. I had no courage or voice to talk with his wife, but the silence conveyed more than what words could have. Chandra was preparing to move out of his official residence after retirement and all his collections were packed neatly in bags and cartons. My next stop in Bhubaneswar was to meet the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Mr. J.D. Sharma, and the Chief Wildlife Warden, Mr. Srivastava, to request them to name the interpretation centres of the Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary in his memory. After all, this was where Chandra had spent most of his time as a researcher and later as a Research Officer with the Odisha Forest Department. In the following week, I also wrote to the Marine Turtle Specialist Group Chair, Jack Frazier and to Kartik Shanker to write to the Government of Odisha to endorse this request, which they did.

When did I first meet Chandra? Perhaps in late 1977, I am not sure. But my first meeting with him was at the Bhitarkanika Sanctuary in Dangmal. By this time, Sudhakar Kar was based in Dangmal as the saltwater croco-

dile researcher, and I was a researcher on crocodylians with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department in Hyderabad. As I was surveying the entire Andhra Pradesh state for crocodylians, I remember Chandra asking if I could also collect information about marine turtles along the Andhra coast. All his correspondence with me since then would mainly be requests for publication or materials related to marine turtles. It all began with my assisting him in obtaining the first set of sea turtle tags through the GOI-UNDP project headed by Dr. H.R. Bustard. Even his last request, when I met him in February 2014, was that I should send him any information that I obtained about Odisha turtles and to inform the Wildlife Institute of India researchers to be in touch with him. I had assured him then that no research or researcher on marine turtles now or in the future could ignore him or his work.

Chandrasekhar was deeply concerned about the drastic developmental changes along the Odisha coast, both onshore and offshore, and their potential impact on marine turtles and their habitats. Often, he would say that, being with the Government, he was not in a position to strongly oppose many of the state decisions, but he had never given any expert opinion officially that would go against the interest of turtles or for that matter any coastal biodiversity. His opinions about Dhamra and Gopalpur Port and the offshore hydrocarbon exploration projects are testimony to his beliefs. He was also keen to be a co-supervisor for any research project being carried out on sea turtles along the Odisha coast; in fact, all the marine turtle projects of the Wildlife Institute of India had him as a co-supervisor and received his support.

Chandrasekhar was one of the twenty officials who participated in a study tour to south Asia and Australia led by the Additional Director General of Wildlife, Government of India, S.C. Sharma and Saroj Kumar Patnaik, then head of the Odisha FD. During the tour, Chandrasekhar was the cynosure of all eyes as he had worked longest on marine turtles and that too at Gahirmatha nesting beach. One of the pioneers of sea turtle research in Australia, Colin Limpus, spent most of his time with Chandra when we were in Queensland and after every detailed discussion, he would ask Chandra his opinion on the subject. We all were envious of him.

Chandra (meaning moon) in his life was really like the moon, the other side of which remained hidden from us. He kept his family life private and did not share his personal problems with anyone. He never took care of his health, travelling endlessly, eating at odd hours, and not following his medical regime. He would also not share with anybody what he was working on. In the initial years of our acquaintance, we would often joke that “Chandra is so secretive that he himself does not know what he is working on”. Little did we know then that he had shared all his work with his co-authors for two famous books without any hesitation, even becoming the second author for each one. Many are probably unaware of the harsh conditions under which he carried out his work in the initial years- staying under a tarpaulin sheet

with all his belongings in a large wooden box which also served as a bed in the day time. The nearest drinking water was many kilometres away and at times he had to boil water from the nearby ditch, use a cloth to filter and to make it potable. No researcher would have continued to work in such conditions but he did. Indeed, he was a pioneer and will remain one for all those who continue working on sea turtles along the Odisha coast.

In his demise, we have all lost a human being of great humility, the sea turtles of Odisha have lost someone who cared for them deeply, and his family has lost their guardian who so that they could have a better life. For me, Chandra will remain with me whenever and wherever I see a marine turtle.

THE TURTLE MAN OF ODISHA

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In January 1997, the delegates of the Northern Indian Ocean Sea Turtle workshop visited Gahirmatha, hoping to see an olive ridley turtle *arribada* on Nasi Island. I was a fresh recruit as a researcher with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and had just begun learning about sea turtles so was very curious to meet the giants of the field of turtle research. That was the first time I met Dr. Chandra Sekhar Kar, and in Gahirmatha where he had started his sea turtle research. I introduced myself to him and he was elated to know that several years after him, another new researcher was going to be studying turtles in Gahirmatha, and coincidentally from the same district and college where he had graduated. We even spoke the same Odiya dialect. He then began talking to me about his days in Gahirmatha in 1974-75 and his memories of how difficult it was to walk down from the Chinchiri-Barunei mouth to the Maipura-Ekakula mouth, a stretch of approximately 35 km backed with Casuarina and mangroves, at times dodging wild boar, feral dogs and negotiating the high tide to cross areas which are inaccessible and inundated.

In later years, I moved to the Rushikulya rookery and met Dr. Kar again during the mass nesting census in March, 1997. We had a long talk about his discovery of Rushikulya with Bivash Pandav, and how the two of them had surveyed the area on a scooter travelling from Bhubaneswar. His memories then went back to his surveys of the

Andhra coast with Satish Bhaskar in the early 1980s, including the exciting surveys of Hope Island in Kakinada.

In the years to come, we were in constant touch and I often met him at his office or at field sites. During the satellite telemetry project with WII from 2006 to 2010, he was always supportive as a co-investigator of the project, both in the office and field. I travelled extensively with him along the coast of Odisha and learnt a lot from his research experience with olive ridley turtles.

Dr. Chandra Sekhar Kar was man with a vision for sea turtle research in Odisha. He had several plans, including policy level changes for sea turtle conservation in Odisha, was closely involved in actions by the Coast Guard and Navy in protecting turtles, and promoted offshore patrolling by engaging fisheries department vessels. He envisaged capacity building for young researchers to pursue a career in sea turtle research resulting in several young biologists engaging with the forest department of Odisha and working on different beaches for data collection and management for sea turtle protection.

His sudden demise has created a vacuum in the sea turtle research and conservation movement in Odisha. Dr. Chandra Sekhar Kar, the sea turtle man of Odisha, is no more, but the turtle paradise he worked on will remain forever.