

## **The OMRCC Update – news on India’s first collaborative marine conservation initiative**

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The Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium (OMRCC) is the first initiative for collaborative marine conservation action in India where scientists, fisherfolk and conservation organisations are attempting work together to develop and execute research initiatives and community-based conservation projects (Aleya 2005). When the OMRCC was formed in December 2004, several objectives were identified. The activities that the OMRCC could engage in range from advocacy efforts for rational turtle conservation measures, fisheries management, addressing issues related to destruction of marine biodiversity particularly due to commercial and industrial activities and so on. What has the consortium achieved in the last eight months?

Even at the inception meeting of the OMRCC in December 2004, members felt that one of the first tasks of the OMRCC should be to focus on creating greater awareness on the sea turtle conservation legislations in Orissa. This would include spreading awareness about one of the significant conservation directions that many OMRCC members helped shape – the revised April 2005 orders of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) constituted by the Supreme Court of India. The revised CEC orders recognized the fishing rights of the traditional fishing community while including elaborate mechanisms to ensure the protection of sea turtles (Anonymous, 2004). The members of the OMRCC had already earlier collaborated in November 2004 to organize

a day-long workshop on sea turtle conservation legislations in Ganjam for traditional fisherfolk.

In January 2005, it came to the OMRCC's attention that some field officers of the Orissa Forest Department had wrongfully detained a few traditional fishermen from the Gundalaba village in Puri district and prevented them from fishing in the coastal waters at the Devi river mouth, which is adjacent to one of the three mass nesting rookeries on the Orissa coast. This occurred despite the CEC having explicitly permitted this kind of benign fishing practice. This had antagonised the fisherfolk, who were also misinformed that turtle conservationists were behind this alleged blanket ban on fishing. On 23 February 2005, the OMRCC held a meeting at Gundalaba village near the Devi rookery and clarified to the fisherfolk what fishing practices the law permitted. The OMRCC recorded the fisherfolk's statements and sent an official complaint to the Orissa Forest and Fisheries Departments. The OMRCC members also clarified to the fisherfolk their position on sea turtle conservation measures. The OMRCC had its follow-up meeting the next day at Bhubaneswar where it was clear to the members that the revised orders of the CEC (Anon, 2004) must be made available to fishing communities and to government officials of the Fisheries and Forest Departments.

Over the next two months, the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bangalore designed booklets in Oriya and in English on marine conservation legislations applicable to Orissa, especially the sea turtle legislations in the state. They also designed display boards to be placed at various locations near the three mass nesting sites. In the month of August, the booklets were distributed and the hoardings were erected. OMRCC members within the state and at the local sites are presently distributing booklets and

### Literature Cited

Aleya, K. 2005. Initiatives towards consensus – the Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium. *Indian Ocean Turtle Newsletter* 1: 12-13.

spreading the message about the CEC's orders in the villages through this communication material. These tools of communication were designed with the inputs of local fishermen with an aim to be comprehensible for an audience that largely could not read. Members within the state, and especially Orissa Traditional Fish Workers' Union (OTFWU) will monitor the effectiveness of these tools over a period of time, which would further help in the development of effective information tools in the future.

Sekhsaria (2005) highlighted concerns with the construction of the Dhamra Port. The OMRCC has taken a serious view of the increasing number of development projects on the Orissa coast. With support from members such as Greenpeace and the OTFWU, the OMRCC will spearhead a campaign against the Dhamra Port due to its negative impacts on the Gahirmatha rookery. At present, there is a proposal for another commercial port at a location near the Jatadhar river mouth proposed by Posco, a South Korean company. The OMRCC will campaign against projects that will adversely impact the marine environment of the state.

### Future plans

Over the next two years, the OMRCC plans to undertake several focused activities which will be executed by its various members. Members of the OMRCC met on 3 August 2005, wherein the members decided to develop specific activities including research studies, environmental campaigns, community-based environmental monitoring programmes, participatory conservation programmes, development of training material and organisation of workshops to facilitate fisheries management. The OMRCC is currently designing future projects and seeking funding for them.

Anonymous. 2004. Central Empowered Committee, Government of India, New Delhi. Visit of Central Empowered Committee to Orissa, February 10-14, 2004.

Sekhsaria, P. 2005. The Dhamra Port. *Indian Ocean Turtle Newsletter* 1: 14-16.