

Film: The Right to Survive – Turtle Conservation and Fisheries Livelihoods

Reviewed by Ashish Fernandes, Oceans Campaigner, Greenpeace India

This 50-minute documentary on turtle conservation in Orissa presents an accurate, factual, yet moving analysis of a complex issue. Orissa's *arribadas* are by now famous, as is the fact that over 10,000 turtles are killed here every year by illegal fishing. Turtle conservation measures are accused, not without some justification, of jeopardising livelihoods. This film captures all viewpoints and goes on to talk of possible solutions that would protect both turtles and traditional fishing livelihoods. In a debate charged with rhetoric, *The Right to Survive* (TRTS) comes as a breath of fresh air. Starting with a focus on the impact that the fishing ban in the core area of the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary (GMS) is having on fishing villages such as Kharnasi, the film moves on to the broader issue of the threat that near-shore trawling poses to both turtles and traditional fishing communities. While factual accuracy and a clear script are the film's strongest points, TRTS also captures the flavour of coastal life in the fishing villages of Orissa, with some stunning sequences.

The film starts in the village of Kharnasi, at the edge of the GMS. The declaration of the GMS put a large chunk of the community's historic fishing grounds off limits, forcing them to sail four hours or more to cross the sanctuary to permitted fishing areas. With many families in the vicious grip of money lenders, Kharnasi has recorded several suicides in the last few years. The village in general blames this on the double whammy of indebtedness and the impact of the fishing restrictions on incomes. TRTS accurately zeroes in on one of the more positive developments in recent years, the orders passed by the Supreme Court's Central Empowered Committee in 2004. If implemented, they will serve to significantly reduce both turtle mortality and livelihood impacts among traditional communities.

There are obvious problems with trying to govern a marine area using the terrestrial model laid down by the *Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972*. For example, under the law, even non-motorised traditional fishers using simple cast nets are prohibited from the GMS, even though this kind of

fishing has absolutely no impact on turtles and very little, if any, on the ecosystem. It is also undeniable that huge turtle mortalities are being experienced along the Devi coastline. Interestingly, the Forest Department has stated on record that it believes there are no turtles in the Devi region and hence it sees no sense in enforcing the fishing restrictions. This despite the fact that beaches around the Devi region have consistently been recording high turtle mortalities! Similarly, while the forest department admits it doesn't have an effective patrolling capacity, it continues to deny that large speed boats with a trained crew are needed to keep illegal trawlers away from the turtle congregations. TRTS accurately zooms in on one simple truth: a fisheries approach will not only safeguard turtles, but also ensure the viability of traditional fishing, by keeping trawlers, the main culprits in terms of turtle mortality and the destruction of near-shore fishing grounds, further out to sea. If fisheries laws were enforced to keep trawlers beyond 20 km. from the coast, turtle congregations would be safe and the fishing grounds of the traditional fishing community would also be protected.

Though the conservation and livelihoods debate is the central theme, TRTS also flags the issue of the many port and oil exploration projects coming up along the coast. Fishermen, researchers and even the Forest Department officials all agree that these projects will cumulatively spell the end for the turtles and for traditional livelihoods. Yet, the conservation vs. livelihood debate seems to be coming in the way of a united opposition to the looming industrial destruction. The film concludes on an unmistakable note of hope and optimism, something which should bring cheer to those who have been following this complicated issue since its beginning over 15 years ago. The filmmakers are of the view that with so many dedicated individuals and groups working to resolve different aspects of the crisis, it should not be long before we begin to see results. For the sake of the ridleys and the fisherfolk of Orissa, let's hope so.

(Originally published in Sanctuary Magazine, December 2006)