

## Rushikulya Sea Turtle Protection Committee Orissa

### Background of the organisation:

The Rushikulya river mouth in Orissa is an important nesting site for olive ridley turtles. Every year from November to the end of January, mating takes place in the coastal waters. Hundreds of thousands of female turtles then visit the beach *en masse* to lay their eggs from February to early April. Wildlife biologist, Bivash Pandav who carried out extensive studies in the area in the early 90's noticed the lack of awareness about the olive ridley turtles among the villagers. This prompted him to set up the Rushikulya Sea Turtle Protection Committee (RSTPC) with the assistance of the local youth in 1998. RSTPC was officially registered in 2003. Right from its inception, volunteers and others became wholeheartedly involved in spreading awareness among the village folk about the ridleys, thus ensuring the involvement of the community in conservation efforts.

### Objectives:

RSTPC's primary aim is to help conserve olive ridley turtles and safeguard their nesting beaches along the Rushikulya coast. Members of the organisation are actively involved in collecting data and monitoring breeding and nesting turtles and recording mortality, nest predation and other

factors that affect the olive ridley population. Since its inception, RSTPC has also been involved in encouraging youth from the local communities to be involved with conservation activities in the area.

### Where we work:

RSTPC's activities are primarily focused along the Rushikulya river mouth along the coast of Orissa. The team members also carry out surveys and conservation activities along this coast in collaboration with other organisations in Orissa and networks such as the Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium.

### Activities:

The members of RSTPC have begun to monitor the nesting population and also assist in the release of hatchlings during mass hatching along the Rushikulya coast. We have also encouraged tourists, locals and especially children to participate in the collection and release of disoriented hatchlings as a part of our awareness programmes. Members also assist in collecting data and collaborate with researchers to provide logistic support and field staff. Towards this end, they are trained in the latest data collection and monitoring/survey methods.



*Olive ridley sea turtle monitoring:*

The current projects of RSTPC include data collection from the tagging of turtles, recapture studies, distribution of the mating congregation, satellite transmitter ranging studies and monitoring hatchling mortality rates.

*Rescue and reorientation of hatchlings on beaches affected by artificial lighting:*

At Rushikulya beach, hatchlings often get disoriented due to artificial lighting. RSTPC members have therefore involved themselves in collecting the hatchlings in buckets and then releasing them in the ocean. Recently, a net has been placed along the beach to enable easy collection of hatchlings.

*Public awareness:*

By putting up stalls and creating sculptures of turtles, RSTPC has made its presence felt at Gopalpur Beach festival in recent years. The V.J. Sheth Memorial Sea Turtle Interpretation Centre has been set up by RSTPC (courtesy the Eastern Shipping Corporation, Mumbai), which aims to increase public awareness about sea turtles and conservation programmes. For the locals, the turtle is sacrosanct as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Education and awareness materials are also provided by RSTPC to local school children and organisations in the form of CDs, journals, documentaries and pictures.

**Support for the organisation:**

Current activities of RSTPC are undertaken in collaboration with other organisations and agencies which include the Forest Department, Orissa, Dakshin Foundation, Bangalore, Wildlife Institute of India, Greenpeace, World Turtle Trust, Wildlife Society of Orissa, People for Animals and the Wildlife Trust of India. Members of RSTPC who have been trained by wildlife experts serve as research assistants, working in collaboration with scientists such as Dr. Bivash Pandav, Dr. Basudev Tripathi, Dr. Kartik Shanker, Dr. C.S. Kar and researchers such as Suresh Kumar and Divya Karnad.

**Plans for the future:**

RSTPC intends to continue and expand the current monitoring programmes. It also aims to increase capacity of staff in education, awareness and outreach programmes. RSTPC aims to strengthen its infrastructural and institutional capacity in order to independently carry out studies in addition to providing assistance to research organisations and individuals. The greater involvement of local community members, including members of fishing communities in turtle conservation activities will increase sensitivity to conservation issues and the importance of conserving resources in order to safeguard livelihoods.

**Role within the network:**

RSTPC is part of local networks of organisations in Orissa, including the Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium (OMRCC) which facilitates sustained interactions amongst member organisations in the state. RSTPC is representative of a globally important olive ridley nesting site at the Rushikulya river mouth and come with a wealth of experience to contribute to the national level network through the sharing of local lessons in conservation.

The Turtle Action Group is an ideal platform for RSTPC to interact with members of organisations involved in sea turtle conservation activities along other parts of the Indian coastline, and would provide an opportunity to showcase its activities to groups of similar interests in the country.

*Contributed by Rabindranath Sahu, Secretary, RSTPC.*

**Contact information:**

Rabindranath Sahu, Secretary, RSTPC.

*Postal address:*

Rushikulya Sea Turtle Protection Committee  
Purunamandha, Palibandha Post, Ganjam district,  
Orissa – 761026

*Phone:* +91 9437204384; +91 9861203479

*Email:* turtle\_rushikulya@yahoo.co.in