

## The MTSG and its involvement in the Dhamra Port, Orissa, India

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There have been numerous discussions over the development of the Dhamra Port in Orissa in India, particularly related to the involvement of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group. However one might personally feel about the involvement of the MTSG, the bottom line is that the group exists to do what it can to conserve marine turtles, and that is the only way I have looked at our involvement. For once I felt like we were doing something for which we were established, providing expert advice on the conservation of turtles and having a realistic, practical impact on the ground. A quick look at the MTSG Mission Statement "*To develop and support strategies, set priorities, and provide tools that promote and guide the conservation of marine turtles, and their ecological roles and habitats*" and the ten sub-statements under this suggests that in this case we have lived up to our own expectations.

However apprehensive one may be of the MTSG involvement, this is exactly what we have achieved. Without MTSG involvement in Dhamra, there would have been significant impacts to turtles. But with MTSG expertise, we have been able to guide development, and keep in check those activities which might have impacted turtles. These activities would have taken place regardless of IUCN's decision to assist with the turtle conservation aspects of this engagement.

From a people perspective, it has been suggested that there was no consultation with India members, but this is actually far from the truth. In August 2006 we approached our regional Vice-Chair in India for guidance and input. A few days later, after consulting with other India members, the MTSG Vice-Chair reverted to us and provided background material and suggestions on what could be done. Claims to the contrary are just not supported by the various email exchanges we as Co-Chairs had with the Vice-Chair at that time. The very reason for establishing a regional Vice-Chair network was

so that there would be an avenue of communication and correspondence between members and the Co-Chairs, and in this case it worked particularly well.

It is personally very painful to me that some members of the turtle conservation community would think I have been insensitive in this matter. If there is one thing that I feel I have brought to the MTSG as a leader is the open and heightened communication with members, regardless of their stand on issues.

Further dialogue with our regional Vice-Chair suggested that there may have been underlying politics between IUCN and other parties in India, and that the MTSG may have been used by levels higher than the Group Co-Chairs. I personally contacted both the Regional Director and the Chair of the SSC, and received written assurances from both that this was not the case. Throughout this involvement with the Dhamra case I have been in constant touch with the IUCN Director General, the SSC Chair, and the Regional Director. All have been and continue to be extremely supportive of the work the MTSG and all its members have done to conserve turtles under these trying circumstances, and regard this as a model for how groups such as IUCN can link up with the private sector to provide tangible conservation benefits.

But where did it all start? The truth is the IUCN-Tata relationship started a while before MTSG became involved, when the IUCN Regional Office in Bangkok and the IUCN Headquarters office deliberated establishing a corporate partnership with the Tata group. Subsequent to a thorough company profile conducted by an external audit firm, IUCN became involved in the Dhamra Port issue. The Regional Director contacted the Chair of the SSC, given the specific species-oriented issues (marine turtles), and the Chair of the SSC subsequently contacted Rod Mast and myself. Our involvement thus started in August 2006, with a series of emails

between ourselves, the SSC Chair, IUCN HQ, and our Vice-Chair in the region. A scoping mission was planned and scheduled for late 2006 to investigate the situation. Both Rod and I suggested to the Chair of the SSC that the regional Vice-Chair be a part of that group, but a request was made that a completely external and unbiased review group be assembled for the mission, and this was clearly explained to the regional Vice Chair at the time.

It eventually transpired that I went on the initial scoping mission in late 2006, and subsequent missions to help the Port, all of which I have reported on in the past (see past MTSG Quarterly reports in the Marine Turtle Newsletter). When I first went to Dhamra, we walked into a Port under development, and were asked to help where we could – and there was plenty of scope for that. The science side of things suggests turtles can indeed coexist with a Port, and evidence both in India (the port at Paradeep is a great example, lying similarly close to a key mass nesting site and not having had any impact on nesting at Devi) and elsewhere (Florida and Australia, for instance, each hosting globally important nesting populations of turtles) does not support claims of an impending catastrophe. Dredging impacts can be and are currently being mitigated. Deflectors on the dredger dragheads, and screens on inflow and outflows, along with a permanent observer programme put together by the MTSG ensures this. Lighting impacts can be controlled, and MTSG input has already provided the solutions for a turtle-friendly light management plan. Ship collisions can be avoided by reductions in speed, at-sea contamination can be minimised by adherence to a sturdy environmental management plan, which IUCN intends to help develop. The truth is, ports and turtles co-exist all over the world, and it is

illogical to suggest, particularly with no evidence to support the claims, that the Dhamra port will be any different.

The MTSG does not direct the relationship between the Tata group and IUCN or run this entire project. The MTSG provides the scientific and technical input on saving turtles. MTSG members who have travelled to India as part of the project (myself, Dena Dickerson, Eric Hawk, Erik Martin and Blair Witherington) have all provided specific input to mitigating impacts of the port with regards to lighting and dredging. All of these inputs far exceed anything that was prescribed by the original EIA and operating permits which were specific to the port

But a sour taste remains from the MTSG involvement, and it saddens me that things are so. As I have stated publicly before, I never set out to alienate anyone, or to hurt anybody's feelings. Indeed, I hoped to establish some wonderful working relationships with colleagues in India, and am disappointed this has not yet transpired. I have worked hard over my professional career to positively impact turtle conservation in many countries, worked closely and developed wonderful friendships with people of varied backgrounds and cultures. I would like to think I am not insensitive to other people's feelings and opinions. But I also know that as a leader sometimes it falls to one person (or two, as in this case) to make a difficult decision, and in the case of Dhamra, a decision was to bring the powers of the group to bear on a complex issue in a way that could have a practical conservation output. For me, there was a tangible reason for engaging the scientific and technical expertise of the MTSG. We save turtles, it's what we do all over the world, and what we continue to do in Dhamra.

## **The Dhamra Port issue: some views from the Chair of the IUCN SSC**

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IUCN's mission embraces the inherent values of species, and the goods and services they provide to human development through meeting the needs and aspirations of people. Comprised of

both government and non-governmental members, IUCN provides an unparalleled platform to deal with the highly complex and