

India's Dhamra Port controversy heats up again[#]

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For as long as the IOSEA website has been tracking news headlines, marine turtles of the Indian state of Orissa have probably been featured more frequently than any other single issue over the past several years. More specifically, a search of the IOSEA archives for "Dhamra port" using the built-in search tool yields dozens of stories, dating back to 2004, about this controversial development project.

In brief, concern has been expressed that the project would create a major port facility, and result in ancillary industrial development, within 5 km of a national park and close to some of Orissa's world-renowned turtle nesting beaches.

Scientists concerned about the potential environmental impacts of the port development circulated a petition in January 2008 seeking a new, comprehensive environmental impact assessment; urging relocation of the proposed port to a less ecologically sensitive area; and calling for the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group (MTSG) to reconsider its involvement in various mitigation aspects of the project. See IOSEA website feature of 20 January 2008: Petition calls for halt to deepwater port project in Orissa, India (http://www.ioseaturtles.org/feature_detail.php?id=227).

The controversy resurfaced in the last month with a renewed appeal by some to re-examine the MTSG's involvement in the project, raising questions about transparency and an apparent lack of consultation of Indian conservationists, including MTSG members. The various exchanges of view are reproduced below.

The two sides of this fascinating debate draw attention to a number of fundamental challenges facing the "sustainable development" paradigm.

On the one hand, legitimate concerns have been articulated about the potential ecological and

social impacts of this particular development within the context of wider industrial activity along the Orissa coast. On the other hand, the project presents an unusual opportunity to proactively engage industry in measures to mitigate the effects of development that is probably inevitable, sooner or later.

Leaving aside purely altruistic motivation, one might suggest that the developer's willingness to invest in mitigation stems from a vested *economic* interest in not harming the environment (i.e. thereby avoiding future punitive sanctions, fines etc). But, taking a more cynical view, even if the company's main aim was merely to deflect ongoing criticism, it could still be argued: Why not make the most of its "environmental sensitivity" to try to maximise the benefits for (or, rather, minimise the damage to) the environment, in the face of India's inexorable quest for economic prosperity.

Added to this already complex mixture is the human element, which is rarely lacking from any controversy in the real world of conservation, where organisations and individuals compete for scarce resources. Beyond the honourable stated aims of environmental protection and proactive engagement of industry, questions will always arise as to who is benefitting -- or not -- from a given relationship and in what way. The Dhamra port case is no different.

In the various interventions reproduced below, questions have been raised about the nature and legitimacy of the IUCN MTSG's association with the project; and of the actions of the developer in allegedly representing this relationship as a "green badge of approval" from a respected NGO. The report of an IUCN 'Scoping mission to the Dhamra Port project' (http://www.dhamraport.com/download/dhamraport_iucnreport.pdf) reveals an awareness and understanding of these particular sensitivities.

At the same time, it is open to speculation as to whether those opposing the development in its current form would have felt compelled to engage in this public dialogue -- and would have been quite as outspoken -- if they, likewise, had been offered a "seat at the table" early on in the process.

Human nature being what it is, there might be

too much water under the bridge to reconcile the various opposing interests, but it might not be too late to try. A truly representative Dhamra port stakeholders meeting and a well-constituted, transparently-operated environmental review panel might be a good starting point.

– Originally published online 25 Apr 2008 on www.iosea.org; reprinted with permission

Letter to IUCN from conservationists and NGOs in India

Ms. Julia Marton L  fevre,
Director General,
IUCN
Rue Mauverney 28,
Gland, 1196
Switzerland

Ref: IUCN's involvement in the Dhamra Port Project, Orissa, India

May 7, 2008

Dear Ms. L  fevre,

As members of the IUCN and MTSG in India we are deeply concerned by the process in which the IUCN and MTSG have become involved in a controversial mega-development project that is a mere 13 km from Gahirmatha, one of the most important nesting beaches of the olive ridley turtle and just 5 km away from the Ramsar site of Bhitarkanika National Park, an internationally critical wetland. Moreover, this area is used for traditional fishing and living spaces by some of the most marginalized peoples of India. In particular, we wish to register our protest at the manner in which we have been sidelined by the IUCN and MTSG leadership in undertaking this project.

Some of the more serious concerns are summarized in the following points:

1. It is widely accepted – even by MTSG - that the Environmental Impact Assessment for the project is woefully inadequate. Therefore, any attempt at mitigation can only be of limited scope.
2. The Dhamra Port is not a single entity; several associated industries such as a ship building yard, a steel plant, and a port-based

fertilizer plant are already being planned, and more are certain to appear in the near future. The cumulative environmental and social effects of all these industries have not been considered.

3. The issue of bilge water and invasive marine species, now recognized as an enormous environmental and economic threat at a global level, has also not been addressed.
4. Dhamra is only one of the sites where the Government of Orissa has planned or initiated construction of ports. There has been no serious engagement on the issue of unplanned coastal development and its consequences for marine biodiversity and marginalized coastal dwellers who depend directly on living marine resources.
5. No stakeholders' meeting on the Dharma Port project has ever been conducted by IUCN/MTSG. Both the Orissa Traditional Fishworkers' Union and the National Fishworkers' Forum (the apex body for the traditional fisher community) have voiced their opposition to the port in the national press and to the IUCN through Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium (OMRCC). Numerous Indian NGOs working in this area have also not been consulted.
6. There has been virtually no consultation or even basic information sharing between IUCN – particularly MTSG leadership – and national members, many of whom have been grappling with the problem long before the IUCN became involved. This squanders considerable local expertise, besides sidelining local members. Several members of the MTSG have not only signed the petition that opposes the port, some have written thoughtful letters of concern, and the Regional Chairman of the MTSG has resigned.