

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.

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Letter to IUCN from conservationists and NGOs in India

Ms. Julia Marton L efevre,
Director General,
IUCN
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Switzerland

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

May 7, 2008

Dear Ms. L efevre,

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.

7. Despite being a non-advocacy group, the wholehearted support of the Port in public fora casts aspersions on the credibility and neutrality of the IUCN and MTSG engagement in this project. <http://lists.ufl.edu/cgi-in/wa?A2=ind0803&L=cturtle&T=0&P=12430>. The Dhamra Port Company Limited (DPCL) is using this purported support of the IUCN to claim that environmental impacts have been adequately addressed and mitigated. This, in particular, has undermined all other initiatives of local organizations, some of whom are IUCN members, against the port.

Given these grave problems that threaten the future of critical protected areas, the credibility of the IUCN in India and the livelihoods of tens of thousands of marginalized peoples, we call upon the IUCN to:

1. Issue a statement that the IUCN abides by the precautionary principle and therefore does not support the construction of the Port in principle. Clarify, in this statement, that any advice that they provide could only mitigate some of the threats to marine biodiversity, endangered species, and local livelihoods and even then, only partially.
2. Insist that the DPCL conduct an EIA to compile baseline ecological data, assess the impact on sea turtle movement, recruitment and nesting beaches, and the effects on Bhitarkanika National Park and Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary.
3. Urge the Government of Orissa to reconsider the unrestricted coastal development plan and to seriously integrate environmental concerns and mitigation into their planning.
4. Actively consult and engage with its membership, many of whom have long years of experience working in this geographical area, who speak the local languages, and who understand the complex socio-cultural-political realities of the situation. Also include representatives from local artisanal fishing organizations, NGOs and other relevant organizations in these consultations.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Please reply to:

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Yours sincerely,

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