

Lakshadweep is famous for its nature tourism and Pitti island can be another attraction for tourists and bird watchers, if managed properly. However, it is also essential to ensure that birds are not disturbed

due to tourism. It is also in the interest of conservation that the poaching of eggs should be checked.

Casuarina Forests Ruin Turtle Nesting Beaches In Orissa

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The prolific plantation of *Casuarina* forests along Orissa's coast has upset its coastal ecology and led to environmental degradation of the coast. *Casuarina*, which was imported from Australia, is favoured due to its fast growing abilities. These forests were created after the last cyclone of 1971 which hit the Orissa coast after Swedish experts advised their creation. The entire Orissa coast including the vital and ecologically sensitive areas like the turtle mass nesting area of Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary beach has been covered by *Casuarina* plantations. Beaches serve as turtle nesting sites in many areas like Devi river mouth, Rushikulya river mouth and Gahirmatha coast and hence no plantations should be established in these areas. Unfortunately, due to these plantations, a noticeable shift has been noticed in turtle nesting trends in these areas since sea turtles avoid nesting on beaches covered by forests.

Operation Kachhapa has protested to the state government about the indiscriminate planting of *Casuarina* trees even on the beach right upto the high tide line in sea turtle mass nesting areas of Devi river mouth. We have noted several instances of sea turtles coming ashore and stopping right at the fencing which protects these plantations. These turtles returned without nesting. These forests have failed to serve their purpose which was apparently the protection of the coastal villages from the cyclonic winds. *Casuarina* is a weak tree which collapses under the force of powerful winds. During the last super cyclone in October, 1999, the entire *Casuarina* belt which fell in the cyclone zone of the coastal stretch from Puri to Paradeep collapsed like matchsticks and was rendered useless. This clearly proved their ineffectiveness against high speed cyclonic winds.

In spite of this, no lessons were learnt by the state government and an ill advised massive *Casuarina* planting programme was launched in 2000 and 2001 to re-create the destroyed forests. *Casuarina* plantations have come up on the Chilika coast, the Puri coast, the Konark coast and the Kujang coast and planting after the supercyclone has been done even upto the high tide line in many places. Millions of rupees have been spent in creating such forests which are obviously of little utility against cyclones.

Once, the Orissa coast had natural sand dunes which were sometimes as high as 80 feet in areas like Satbhaya village in the Gahirmatha coast. The old topography sheets of this area show these sand dunes. Fresh water springs were running perennially from these sand dunes. Sand dunes serve as reservoirs of underground fresh water for farming and drinking. Sand dunes are dynamic and shifting in nature and change their position and height according to seasonal winds. Sand dunes provide another ecological function by arresting catastrophic tidal surges which was seen at Ersama coast during the previous super cyclone. By planting trees like *Casuarina* sand dunes become flat and have almost disappeared from the Orissa coast. Beach formation by build up of sand deposits is also helped by sand dunes and artificially restricting their formation is leading to coastal erosion at many places. Expert studies are immediately called for to assess the environmental impact of *Casuarina* forests on the beaches of Orissa and to suggest remedial measures.

If concerned individuals and organizations would like to protest against loss of sea turtle nesting beaches in Orissa due to *Casuarina* plantations by the forest department, they may write to the following officials :

Director General of Forests,
Ministry of Environment, Government of India,
New Delhi

Mr. S.C. Sharma,
Additional Director General (Wildlife)
Ministry of Environment, Government of India,

New Delhi (E-mail : sssharma@nic.in)

Mr. Paramatma Singh,
Principal Chief Conservator of Forests,
Government of Orissa,
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Nesting of a Small Hawksbill Turtle at Indira Point, Great Nicobar Island

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Indira Point on Great Nicobar Island is the southernmost point of India (6°45'38"N, 93°48'85"E) and is only about 150 km from Sumatra, Indonesia. Great Nicobar Island is a part of the Andaman & Nicobar group of islands, which have important nesting and feeding populations of leatherbacks, green turtles and hawksbills (Bhaskar, 1993; Andrews, 2000). Great Nicobar Island also has a significant nesting population of leatherback turtles (Andrews & Shanker, 2002). Hawksbill turtles have been reported to nest at a few beaches on this island. Bhaskar (1979) reported nesting of hawksbills at Indira point (or Pygmalion point as it was then known). The beach at Indira point is less than half a kilometer in length and the offshore approach is very rocky.

During monitoring of leatherback turtles at Galathea during 2001-02, we visited the beach on a single night. On January 23, 2002, a hawksbill was observed nesting at Indira point. The turtle was extremely small for a nesting hawksbill (CCL – 63 cm; CCW – 52 cm). She laid 46 eggs. Following this, the beach was monitored for one week, during which period a single hawksbill (CCL – 83 cm, CCW – 73 cm) nest was recorded.

While winter may not be the peak nesting season for hawksbills, interviews with the locals suggest that intensity of green turtle and hawksbill nesting at Indira point is low. There is a lighthouse at Indira Point, and perhaps one or two of the workers can be trained and remunerated for monitoring this beach.

References

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