

## **An Update On Turtle Conservation Activities In Orissa**

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### ***OPERATION KACHHAPA ACTIVITIES FOR 2000-2001 TURTLE SEASON***

#### **Support to Government Enforcement**

A 32-foot patrol trawler has been constructed by the Forest Department and will be ready for use within the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary by the end of the year 2000. It is hoped that the presence of this trawler will make a substantial impact in decreasing illegal trawling activity. The Forest Department has informed Operation Kachhapa that its staff will conduct three night patrols per week, using the new boat, during the 2000-2001 turtle season. In order to encourage these critical nighttime patrols, Operation Kachhapa will be providing financial incentives to the forest staff that volunteer for this duty. Further incentives "prizes" (such as jackets, rucksacks, etc.) will be considered for staff who carry out a large number of patrols, and for those who assist in seizures.

Operation Kachhapa will continue to hire a trawler to patrol the coastal areas outside the Marine Sanctuary. A patrol trawler will be provided within the Marine Sanctuary if and when requested by the Forest Department. It was decided that the Project Co-ordinator should initiate resolute discussions with the Coast Guard in an attempt to persuade them to start shallow water patrols with "Charlie" boats.

#### **Interactions with Central & State Governments**

The Project Coordinator is scheduled to have regular meetings with the Coast Guard to discuss joint efforts in monitoring trawler activity, to encourage shallow water patrols, and the enforcement of fisheries laws. The cooperation of

the Coast Guard in the past has been extremely beneficial to the conservation of sea turtles.

Now that they are taking an active interest in the nesting islands of Ekakulanasi I and II and Babubhali, it is expected that Operation Kachhapa will develop stronger ties with the DRDO this season. However, project personnel must be sensitive to the now strained relations between the Forest Department and DRDO, due to jurisdictional conflict over these areas.

Legal pressure regarding the Bhitarkanika PIL (including the construction of Dhamra Port) and the crude oil terminal near the Rushikulya turtle nesting site, will continue throughout the 2000-2001 season.

#### **Monitoring**

In order to provide communication between the Operation Kachhapa patrol trawler, the Devi River mouth camp and the Puri Forest Division, two Motorola wireless handsets have been purchased and given to the forest staff. The handsets will be used on the Department's radio frequency, and with the Division's existing base station.

It is extremely important that Operation Kachhapa maintains a presence in the field. This includes information on turtle mortality, nesting activity, disturbances along the beaches, and trawler activity out at sea. Two field stations were established at the start of the 2000-2001 turtle season. One is on the mainland near the Devi River mouth, and the other at Rushikulya. Regular monitoring will be carried out using

these two camps as field bases. The camps will be staffed with three people each, and will operate from December 2000 to the end of May 2001.

### **Fishing Community Awareness**

Building on the positive relationship that has developed between Operation Kachhapa and the local fishing communities, brochures and posters will be produced illustrating marine fishing laws. These laws protect the rights of the traditional fishermen. The aim is to provide information on the communities' legal rights to protect the area within 20 kilometres from the shore from illegal fishing by large, mechanised trawlers.

The local fishing communities, who are still recovering from the effects of the cyclone, have been badly affected by a decrease in their fishing catch due to extensive illegal operations by mechanised trawlers. While the fishermen grow increasingly frustrated by the situation, their knowledge of the laws that protect their traditional rights and prohibit trawling close to the coast line, is limited. Operation Kachhapa proposes to "level the playing field" and empower the local fishermen with the knowledge they need to stand up for their rights and protect their way of life.

### **Fishing Community Relief Work**

Using the remaining amount from the Operation Kachhapa cyclone relief fund, modest community-based projects, such as health and water quality improvement, will be developed and supported in fishing villages which have special needs. For example, the village of Sahana has a high incidence of children with polio, which would greatly benefit from the assistance of Operation Kachhapa.

### **Wandering Minstrels**

Using traditional methods of communicating information through song, dance and story telling, Operation Kachhapa is spreading modern

conservation awareness of the olive ridley sea turtle to villages along the coast. Operation Kachhapa has hired two entertainers to travel to over 100 villages with a large scroll depicting the story of the sea turtle that is sung and told by an actor while being accompanied by traditional music.

The tour, which began in early January, has had a very positive response and the performances have been well attended and are proving very popular. In addition to learning about the plight of the olive ridley, the shows help to initiate discussions about the illegal trawling and the deaths of the turtles. In some cases these conversations have resulted in action by the traditional fishers.

### **Turtle Interpretation Centre at Bhubaneswar**

Creating awareness of the plight of the olive ridley sea turtle is a major focus of Operation Kachhapa. However, as many of the beaches and villages where turtle activity takes place are remote and inaccessible, spreading the message of the importance of turtle conservation has thus far been limited to the printed word and stories by the print and television media. To allow individuals to better understand the issue, Operation Kachhapa is currently developing plans for a creative learning centre in Bhubaneswar that would, effectively, bring the sea to the city.

A modest building has been hired in which an interactive turtle interpretation centre will be created. This will include a life-size mural (which is being painted by students from a local art college) detailing life under the sea and the life of the sea turtle. Three-dimensional models of turtles, fish, shells and vegetation will complete the effect of an underwater environment. Nets and TEDs will be strung from the ceiling to illustrate the impact, and legal solutions, of mechanised trawling. Along another wall will be examples of mangrove forests, turtle eggs and shells. Known predators of hatchlings will also be depicted and critical information about sea turtles mounted throughout the display. Slide and video shows for school children, teachers, legislators,

government officials and other interested visitors will be held to create turtle awareness.

### Activities in 2000 – 2001

- Operation Kachhapa (OpK) set up field camps in early December at the mouth of the Devi River and at Rushikulya, with a total of six field assistants. This was in time to monitor the mass gathering and mating of turtles offshore. The staff is working against considerable odds this season as high tides are causing numerous breaks along the shoreline, making monitoring difficult. One "beat" is nearly 80 km long. But with the help of a motorbike and bicycles they are doing an excellent job

- We understand that at present no turtle mortality counts, other than the ones made by the OpK field assistants, are being carried out outside Gahirmatha. Everyone - including the Forest Department and the Orissa Government - are now relying on these figures.

- Operation Kachhapa's patrol trawler is based at the mouth of the Devi River. It is carrying out regular patrols, using staff from the Puri Forest Division and the local police force, between Paradeep and Rushikulya.

- The Coast Guard are being very cooperative, despite severe budget cuts. After a number of discussions between Operation Kachhapa's Project Co-ordinator and the Coast Guard, they are now carrying out regular sorties along the coast, including the shoreline.

- The Forest Department has been carrying out regular patrols, using their new trawler, within the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary.

- Despite the increase in patrolling (by the Coast Guard, Forest Department and Operation Kachhapa's trawler), illegal trawlers continue to make bold attempts to operate within the 20 kilometre zone and without the mandatory TEDs, and turtle mortality is still high. So far the dead turtle count this season has reached 6,000. This information makes the use of TEDs all the more

critical. OpK plans to increase lobbying for the use of TEDs.

- To date over twenty trawlers have been seized, although hundreds more have been scared off by the vigilant patrolling.

- In an attempt to reduce turtle mortality, the Orissa State Government issued a notification in December 2000, banning mechanised fishing within 20 kilometres from the coast, along a 150 kilometre stretch between the mouths of the Jatadhar River mouth and Magarmukh-Chilka, from January 1 to May 31, 2001.

- Operation Kachhapa's travelling minstrels and other awareness activities are proving to be extremely popular and have resulted in meaningful discussions and action within the local fishing communities against the illegal trawler activity. A number of petitions have been drawn up demanding an end to trawling by boats from Andhra Pradesh. Operation Kachhapa's Project Coordinator has been requested to hand these petitions over to the Director of the Fisheries Department in Cuttack.

- To our surprise, OpK was contacted this week by none other than the Fisheries Department requesting assistance to carry out patrols, since their own trawler was out of order. We have jumped at the opportunity and suggested that they might like to carry out joint patrols with the Forest Department using the Operation Kachhapa trawler.

- The court case against the construction of the Dhamra Port (which has now been added to the joint Wildlife Protection Society of India and Wildlife Society of Orissa's Public Interest Litigation regarding Bhitarkanika and turtle conservation) has suffered delays due to lengthy strikes by lawyers in Orissa, during which the courts could not operate. From its conception, the project has received the highest political support from the State Government and a lot of tension surrounds the case. Operation Kachhapa is the most vocal opponent to Dhamra Port, leaving the project vulnerable to attacks by the Port's

supporters, including powerful union leaders who are saying that the court case is anti-development and anti-employment. The Project Co-ordinator and all our field staff have had to take certain precautions and be extremely careful in their day to day activities.

The biggest tragedy is that the turtle deaths are still high. But it is clear that the massacre would be far, far greater, and the problem would have remained unknown, undocumented and unchallenged if it was not for such efforts as Operation Kachhapa.

## **Community Effort at Kolavipaalam, Kerala**

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Kolavipaalam hamlet was recently in the news in Kerala for being this year's recipient of P.V Thampy Award which has been instituted to recognise and encourage people's efforts at conservation of natural resources. Located in Payyoli Gram Panchayat, Quilandi Taluka of Kozhikode District in North Kerala, Kolavipaalam is a quiet village with relatively less dense human population as compared to the rest of coastal Kerala. The local fisherfolk community has been protecting not only the Olive Ridleys but also carrying out mangrove afforestation on their mud banks. What is heart warming is that this entire effort began on the basis of a news article on the endangered status of Olive Ridleys in The Hindu. This spurred the local youth to protect the turtles which came to nest on their beach every year. They even recognise some of the "regulars" - a female with a damaged flipper that unfailingly nests nearly at the same spot!

The local youth organised themselves into a group that they have named as "Theeram Prakruti Samrakshana Samiti", literally translated as a Committee to Protect the Coastal Environment. Theeram has been awarded this year's P.V.

Thampy award in November 2000 along with which goes a cash award of Rs. 5,000/-. This would give the youth a much needed boost, ever since their mentor Mrs. Prakruti Srivastava, DFO Nilambur has been transferred. During her tenure, she started the practice of paying daily wage to a couple of locals to guard the turtles. Financial and material assistance was also provided by the department as well as by the local community members for the hatchery that has been constructed. Freshly laid eggs are transferred to this hatchery in order to protect them from the jackals that abound near the mangrove forests. When the hatchlings come out of their nest, they are collected in a water basin and released into the sea.

There is no monetary gain from this effort and yet the youth give in their entire energy to protect the turtles and to spread awareness on the importance of protecting their environment. When questioned about their motive this was the reply that stumped me "We get to meet interesting people like you and get to know so much more about what is happening else where". Empowerment is another word to describe their motive and satisfaction at having done a job well.