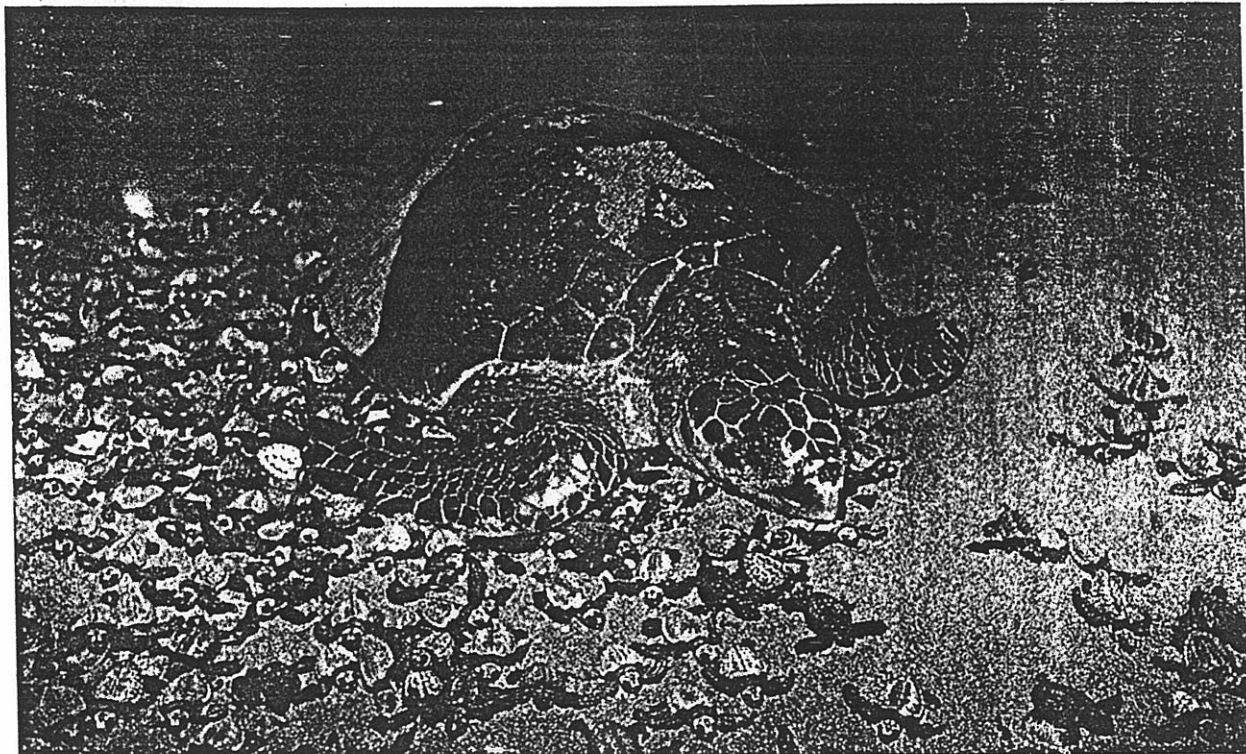


ORISSA

Turning the Turtles Away

A fishing jetty endangers the survival of Olive Ridley turtles and their habitat

Photographs by SHEKAR DATTARI



By ROHIT BRIJNATH with RUBEN BANERJEE

THE sea must be undisturbed. The sky blotted by clouds. The south wind swirling gently. Midnight close at hand. And then, out of this sea of silence, they come. Green, huge, they scunch across the sand in ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, and soon the entire beach is one moving mass. It is the time of the *arribada* (arrival) of the Olive Ridley turtle.

Every year in a trick of navigation still unexplained, they come to a tiny strip of sand on an Orissa beach off the coast of the rich mangrove forests of Bhitarkanika Sanctuary to lay their eggs. Last year 610,000 came to lay a possible 53,680,000 eggs. It is nature at its most awesome, a phenomenon that is yet to be understood.

Now perhaps it never will. For in a series of moves—many of them illegal—the Orissa Government has threatened the very survival of the turtle and its habitat. Top on the list of violations is the creation of a fishing jetty—besides the one already existing—within the sanctuary, at Talchua, that is certain to disrupt the turtle breeding ground. Now more than 1000 fishing boats will

A Ridley with newly hatched turtles; (below) laying eggs

vie with the turtles for food in an unequal relationship in which the fishing nets win and the turtles die.

To build the jetty and enable fishermen to transport their catch to urban markets other violations are being committed. An 80-km long road with three bridges is being hacked out through the core of the Bhitarkanika sanctuary. The fragile eco-system of the mangrove forests has already been disrupted by the massive encroachments committed by the 40,000-odd people who live around its periphery. The Orissa Government also proposes to raze standing forests under the guise of relocating cyclone affected villages. It is a flirtation with havoc, but the Government seems unconcerned with its Fisheries

ministry just last fortnight deciding to construct three more jetties in the area.

Reaction in the form of outraged environmentalists has been immediate. Says Belinda Wright of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature: "The Talchua fishing complex will probably be the biggest single blow to the continued survival of the Olive Ridley. It will destroy the largest congregation of ma-

