

## Editorial: Kachhapa - Ashoka's most accomplished ambassador

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Accounts of Ashoka's prowess as an empire builder, visionary leader, and promoter of Buddhism are well known, but why do we hear so little of Kachhapa in relationship to the last and most renowned king of the Mauryan dynasty? Ashoka, in his later, more illuminated years, represents the noblest of quests - to unite humanity in collaboration and peace; and Kachhapa is his greatest ambassador.

Kachhapa, or olive ridley sea turtles, that nest in Orissa migrate to Sri Lanka, underscoring their role as Ashokan ambassadors. But that is only the start: marine turtles have tremendous capacity to migrate and disperse over vast distances. Green turtles that feed in the Gulf of Kutch nest in Pakistan; leatherback turtles that nest in the Nicobars most likely circulate throughout most of the Indian Ocean basin, possibly venturing even into the Red Sea to feed on seasonal concentrations of their favourite food – jellyfish. During certain stages of their life cycle marine turtles may enjoy Kalinga's world famous beaches, or the once tranquil feeding grounds at the doorstep of Krishna's palace, or the remote islands of far flung territories once inhabited by cannibals, but the rest of their lives are spent in other territories – and often on the high seas. "India's marine turtles" are only "India's" for a part of their life history, otherwise they are not Indian at all. These are, after all, *marine* turtles, and the oceans are their home. It is nothing for a turtle to cross an ocean basin while it is growing into an adult, or to make migrations of thousands of kilometres between feeding grounds and mating grounds.

No matter how hard India's cadre of dedicated conservationists labour to conserve these intriguing animals, their efforts - if carried out in

isolation - will be incomplete. The best marine protected areas in Gahirmatha, the most enthusiastic community support for nest protection in Goa, the longest running student programme in Madras, none of these alone will be sufficient. We must make full use of Ashoka's ambassadors, and develop efficient and comprehensive programmes for regional international cooperation.

Over the past few years there have been numerous initiatives uniting marine turtle specialists from the Indian Ocean in workshops, seminars, and other events, in order to enhance communication and collaboration. Now, an international agreement is being developed to promote and strengthen cooperation between nations: *The Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Marine Turtles and their Habitats in the Indian Ocean and South East Asia* ("IOSEA"). Between October 19 – 22, 1999 representatives from 22 nations in the Indian Ocean and South East Asian region, as well as specialists from half a dozen other organizations, met in Perth, Australia to discuss needs and mechanisms for developing regional conservation and management of marine turtles. This was followed by the first round of inter-governmental negotiations from July 11 – 14, 2000 in Malaysia. Attended by representatives of 24 countries, and observers from regional and international agencies, the delegates at the meeting in Malaysia adopted a text Memorandum of Understanding.

The preamble of the MOU sets out a series of considerations, recognising that marine turtles in the region are endangered and that the protection of these animals and their habitats are clearly stated priorities for conservation in various

instruments, both regional and international. Numerous human activities are acknowledged as posing threats to these animals, including various forms of direct exploitation, modification and destruction of habitats, coastal development, pollution, fishing activities, mariculture, tourism and inappropriate conservation actions. Recognising that marine turtles disperse and migrate over vast distances, and depend on a variety of marine and coastal environments, the preamble emphasises the need for integrating conservation and development activities, as well as effective international cooperation. Because the support and collaboration of a wide variety of stakeholders from different sectors of society, and various organisations – governmental and non-governmental – is essential, the preamble is written to be all inclusive. A fundamental recognition is that marine turtles are often under threat because of human actions on the high seas, particularly modern fishing activities, and that these issues need to be addressed. It is acknowledged that states from both inside and outside the Indian Ocean and South East Asian region have responsibilities toward the conservation of marine turtles and their habitats in the region, and they should be encouraged to cooperate and contribute toward the overall goal of marine turtle conservation.

The objective of the MOU “is to protect, conserve, replenish and recover marine turtles and their habitats, based on the best scientific evidence, taking into account the environmental, socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the signatory States.” Among the actions that are described in the agreement are: promoting cooperation among signatory states, harmonising national legislation, joining other international instruments related to marine turtle conservation, establishing a Secretariat, establishing an Advisory Committee, designating national authorities for each signatory, providing regular reports to the Secretariat on the implementation of the MOU, and evaluating the question of funding. A critical action will be the development, and subsequent implementation, of a Conservation and Management Plan that will

adequately address measures for the conservation of marine turtles and their habitats, management of direct exploitation and trade, reduction of threats – with fisheries bycatch specifically named, research, education, information exchange and capacity building.

The next round of negotiations is planned for early 2001, and this is when the Conservation and Management Plan (CMP) will be developed through a process of negotiation. Because it is the CMP that will provide guidance on specific measures to be carried out by the signatory states to the IOSEA, these negotiations will be critical, for they will set the tone for how effective the MOU will be.

Other international agreements for marine turtle conservation include the *Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles* and the *Convention on Migratory Species Understanding Concerning Conservation Measures for Marine Turtles of the Atlantic Coast of Africa*. The former is the only legally binding international treaty focused on marine turtle conservation, and it is expected to come into force in early 2001. Known as the “IAC”, this treaty has served as a model for developing other related agreements, including the IOSEA. Even with the advantage of having had a model to follow, the IOSEA presents a huge challenge: the region under consideration is comprised of scores of sovereign states, with tremendous diversity of cultures, religions, environmental, political and social conditions. Sadly, there are also long and contentious histories of conflict between some States of the IOSEA region. Can we put aside these differences and work towards a common goal ?

Time will tell! The Indian delegation has participated actively in both meetings to develop the IOSEA, and clearly India has all the potential to play a critical leadership role as this important agreement develops and is implemented. What nation could speak better to the vision of Ashoka, and show the true role of Kachhapa as his venerated ambassador?